


A force for change

An influential report by which is likely to recommend the blueprint for the way the police force is structured in future is due to be published this summer. Professor Tim Newburn, an expert on the changing nature of policing, predicts how the police service is likely to look in the next decade.

 What will the police as an organisation look like in ten or 20 years? How will the police fit into the broader set of services provided by other policing bodies and what will all this mean for the police workforce?

One of the most obvious trends in policing in recent decades has been centralisation – despite all the talk of communities, neighbourhoods and citizen-focus. Over the past 30 years we have seen the progressive emasculation of local police authorities. Government, in the shape of the Home Office, Police Standards Unit, Audit Commission and increasingly Downing St, has become ever more dominant. And, crucially, there has been the growth of national policing bodies and functions – the most recent being the Serious and Organised Crime Agency.

National police force

All this should make us ask whether the emergence of a fully national public police force is likely. Though it has been raised regularly ever since it was formally considered by the Royal Commission in the early 1960s, rarely has it garnered much support. More recently, however, the Superintendents' Association has backed the idea, and although others still shy away, at least publicly, momentum is building. Over the past year or so the Government has mooted the idea of introducing 'regional' or 'strategic' forces – a plan under which the existing 43 constabularies would be replaced with a smaller number, possibly 18, forces. Rumours suggest that an even smaller number of forces – probably eight or nine – are to be pro-



posed by HM Inspectorate of Constabulary later this summer.

In fact this is only a stepping-stone toward the eventual creation of a national police service. The major barriers standing in the way of such a development have largely been removed. With large parts of the police service at senior levels seemingly content with, or resigned to, the creation of strategic forces, it is hard to see how the shift to a national force will be prevented. Moreover, I see no likelihood of general public resistance.

Local concerns are likely to be offset by the increasing attention paid to neighbourhood policing. What has come to be known as

the 'reassurance policing' agenda promises the reintroduction of local, community-based policing in which all neighbourhoods get a small, dedicated policing team. Variations on this theme were promoted by all political parties during the last general election and such developments are very much in line with some of the principles of public sector reform.

Local control

I think we can offer a tentative answer to the question of what the police service will look like in 10 to 20 years. I expect to see the dual trends toward centralisation and localism result in the creation

of a national police force responsible not only for serious organised crime and for national functions, but also for strategic direction and management of public policing in general. Below the national tier, I expect responsibility for delivery to be devolved to basic command unit or operational command unit level, or something similarly local. And, when I say, devolved, that must be practically and not just rhetorically. This means local priorities, local involvement and, crucially, local budgets.

The second question is what the broader landscape of policing will look like? The answer is more complicated. We are already witnessing the emergence of a number of important trends including the rather startling proliferation of private security. Alongside police and private security, there are the new auxiliaries such as wardens, community support officers and the rest. Policing itself is becoming more business-like, and the public more and more like consumers – not simply of a service, but of commodities. Undoubtedly, then, the future of policing is one characterised by the growing visibility of a broadening array of providers with increasing emphasis on local public purchasing.

Buying services

In short, the question of who will be providing policing services in the future is probably not the most interesting question. Rather, it is how will this be controlled, organised and governed? Here I think we can look to other public services for a clue to potential future directions. Like it or not, the creation of some form of purchaser-provider split seems to be the road we are taking. Quite how this will

work is far from clear. However, I think we can expect to see the creation of local purchasing bodies, with budgets that enable them to buy services from among all the local and regional providers – be they public, private or municipal. One possible model is something akin to the new NHS Foundation Trusts. The future increasingly appears to be one in which government will become the regulator rather than the primary provider of policing services.

What about the workforce? Looking at what has been happening in health and education is instructive I think. Assuming I am right, we may safely anticipate that public sector reform in policing is likely to mean at least:

- Greater emphasis on professional training, including continuous professional development
- A progressive shift away from the notion of omni-competence toward specialisation
- Significant changes to the nature of recruitment to the police service, including multi-point entry
- Changes to the rank structure, including the introduction of advanced practitioners
- Increasing use of non-sworn specialists
- Further expansion in the numbers of non-sworn personnel with limited powers
- Much greater emphasis on the citizen or consumer and
- Restructuring of the police organisation at both national and local levels, including at a local level the creation of some form of purchasing body, possibly as a not for profit or public interest company.

Role of constable

It now appears to be widely accepted that the amount of police work that can be undertaken without recourse to full police powers is expanding. Given this, the argument goes, it makes sense for much of this 'non-core' work to be undertaken by non-sworn personnel, leaving such work as requires full powers to be undertaken by sworn personnel. This raises the inevitable question of what the role of the constable will be in 10 to 20 years.

In answer to this question



there is a range of possible answers. At one end, there is a dystopian vision in which police officers are progressively pressed into a residual, largely public order and emergency service-oriented role, whilst auxiliary officers, wardens and private security guards increasingly become the everyday visible public face of policing. Alternatively, there is the more optimistic view that the role of the constable is one that will, out of necessity, become both more specialised and increasingly professionalised.

There are good reasons, in my view, to think that it is the latter route that is the more likely. In part, this is because a very similar road is being travelled in health, in education, in social care and other parts of the public sector. Although each is seeing a burgeoning of support staff, the emergence of new professional roles, the introduction of new forms of management and accountability, the growing visibility of quasi-markets and private sector providers, the general aim of reform has been to increase the specialist skills of teachers, social workers, nurses, and other public sector workers. Their roles are changed. They are

increasingly supplemented by other staff. But they are not replaced.

The second reason is that this already appears to be the direction that policing is taking. There are already forces experimenting with identified specialist career pathways for constables, such as in investigation. There is no reason in principle, and many reasons in practice, why similar models should not emerge in other areas of policing.

Bedrock of policing

Thirdly, there are two absolutely vital features which distinguish police officers from other providers and which provide the basis for putting limits on the reform process. The one most frequently cited is the very thing that defines the police role – the ability to use force on behalf of the state whenever the occasion demands it. Though even this boundary is blurring, it nevertheless remains the bedrock on which we understand and define the police role.

It might be argued that increasing specialisation and professionalisation will mean that the police officer's mandate is progres-

sively restricted. I think not. Though day-to-day working may change markedly, and a whole range of auxiliaries and other staff may progressively undertake policing duties, it must surely remain the case, as one distinguished academic put it many years ago, that it is the police officer, and the police officer alone, who 'is equipped, entitled and required to deal with every exigency in which force may have to be used to meet it'.

Trust

The other feature, which distinguishes the police officer from others, is trust. Despite declining public confidence in policing in recent decades, there remains a high residual level of public trust in the police. My sense, therefore, is that despite the growing visibility of private security, the relatively rapid expansion of police staff roles and responsibilities, the emergence of the new auxiliaries, and indeed the spread of non-sworn personnel with limited powers, there remains an important, indeed possibly integral, role for sworn officers.

This leads me to my final point. It is that the emergence of this increasingly complicated array of providers raises the crucial question of governance. How is policing to be regulated and coordinated. At a national level there will be a need to create some form of independent regulatory body that will oversee, guide and hold to account the national police force and other services. Similarly, at a local level, some new form of regulatory forum will undoubtedly emerge and will need to stand outside any single agency. On a day-to-day basis, however, there remains the question of how, what is likely to be a complex patchwork of policing officials, will be managed, organised and directed. There is an opportunity, in other words, for the emergence of a cadre of sworn officers who will have this responsibility, and by responsibility I mean more than simply supervisory responsibilities. Whether this occurs depends somewhat on the attitude the police service takes to such reforms.

