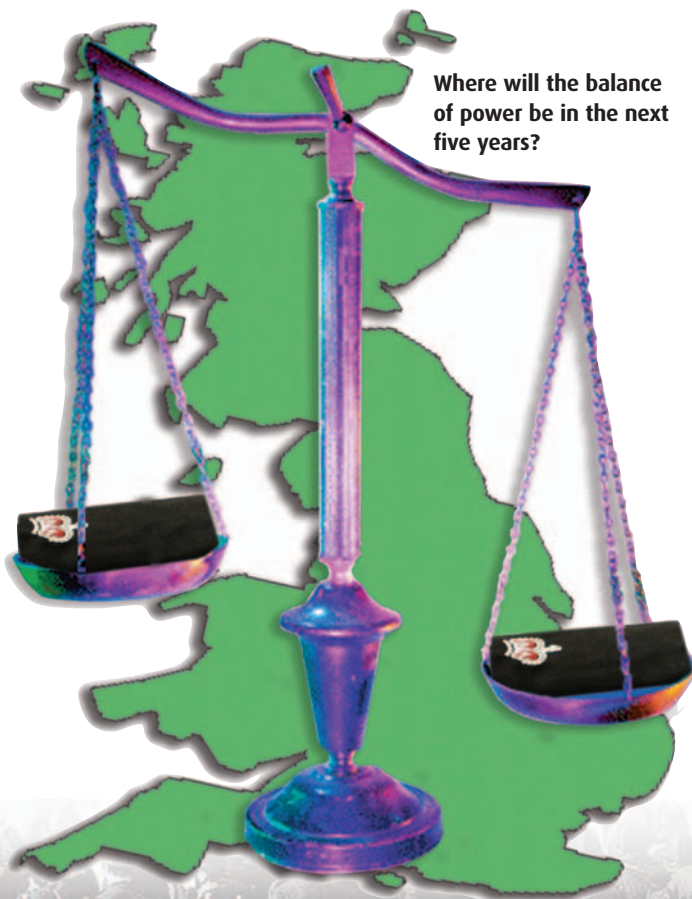


Command and control?

The future of policing is an ever-changing canvas. But as the public demand a more localised police service, the role of many superintendents is rapidly evolving as they take on some of the responsibilities previously carried out by chief officers. In the run up to their annual conference, Ian Johnston, vice-president of the Superintendents' Association, outlines how the Basic Command Unit is destined to be at the heart of the changes.

Juggling a budget of thousands and making crucial decisions about local policing priorities was once the sole remit of the chief constable – but increasingly the superintendents rank is shouldering such responsibilities in a trend that is set to continue.

The Government's White Paper, *Building Communities Beating Crime*, strongly emphasised the importance of the role of Basic Command Units (BCUs) in community contact and the concept of neighbourhood policing which will be delivered through BCUs and will directly impact upon public satisfaction levels. BCUs will become responsible for providing policing information to each household in their area and greater emphasis will be placed on the work of Crime and Disorder Reduction Partnerships. Throughout the country, the chief superintendents and superintendents in charge of BCUs are also having an increasing say over how they spend their budgets. An on-going Home Office study on the subject has shown that already 60 per cent of BCUs have control over their own finances.



Where will the balance of power be in the next five years?

Without doubt, given the current momentum, the BCU will become central to how England and Wales are policed in the 21st century.

Despite the challenges ahead, the Superintendent's Association believes full delegation will encourage greater innovation and improved performance, giving BCU commanders greater flexibility in delivering policing locally. Many management commentators are on record as stating that delegation can no longer be seen as an occasionally managerial indulgence, instead it must become a necessity. If commanders are given more power locally over budgets it will allow them to work more effectively with partners, having the authority to commit funds to initiatives that will impact on crime reduction within their areas.

But delegated powers must be accompanied by full support from headquarters in terms of the provision of professional staff and appropriate training to the BCU team and delegation can only work if conducted within a corporate framework. The relationship between headquarters command

teams, headquarters departments and basic command units will be crucial and in many forces, service level agreements are proving to be an effective way of ensuring consistency.

Because, while it is widely acknowledged that BCUs have become increasingly more autonomous, there needs to be a recognition of the real danger of replacing 43 forces for 250 BCU commanders who are all doing their own thing. The independent control of BCU commanders needs to be balanced against working within an overall framework, so that if a force priority overall is to combat drugs, you would not have a commander saying 'we want to prioritise a crack down on speeding'. In other words, chief officers make the ultimate decisions in relation to a force's priorities.

Evidence of this symbiotic relationship already exists in many forces using a 'traffic light system', which indicates whether a decision could be made at local level or would need to go through other processes, such as approval from chief officers. This must be the way forward.

The precise role of BCU commanders will also need to be examined to determine what is expected in terms of delivery, and as importantly, what policing provision will be provided from outside the BCU. Superintendents will need clear guidelines on delegation and empowerment and enhanced training for BCU command teams will support the move to greater delegation. The Government's White Paper also raises the idea of a specialist qualification for BCU commanders and a mandatory qualification for those seeking BCU command.

Basic Command Unit Structure

The changing structure of the police service is another area for hot debate. Many different models of BCUs exist across the service. The rank of a commander heading a BCU remains an issue in some forces. The majority of BCU commanders hold the rank of chief superintendent as they deal with high-level issues and can often be the point of contact for the chief executive of the local authority. Yet, some forces are still using superintendents in the position.

There has been much discussion within the Association in relation to the 'ideal' structure of a BCU. There is also considerable variance in terms of the number of superintendents and chief inspectors supporting the commander. Some BCUs have a detective superintendent crime manager, whilst others have a superintendent dedicated to crime and disorder/partnership work although the vast majority have a superintendent of operations.

The Association has also found that the number of staff who make up a BCU does not always seem to be directly linked to the local population, number of crimes being dealt with or police numbers.

Where the most common structure, i.e. a chief superintendent supported by a number of superintendents and chief inspectors is in place, the role of the chief superintendent is changing to become more strategic - dealing with the three main issues of corporacy, or where the BCU fit into the force's overall plan, leadership and partnerships with other organisations, while the superintendent is becoming more responsible for the day-to-day operational running of the division.

In the 1990s many, including the HM Inspectorate of Constabulary, recommended that the ideal size of a BCU was 150 to 200 police officers. The figure now most commonly recommended is 250 to 350 police officers.

The majority of BCUs have been structured to ensure that they match up with local authority boundaries but opponents of very large BCUs continue to raise the questions over the balance between ensuring localism and identity against the need for the BCU to tie in with such boundaries.

The role of the Superintendent's Association

Given the anticipated changes, the Superintendents' Association set up a communication network between commanders in charge of BCUs, enabling them to share information and problem solving as well as creating up-to-date contacts for organisations who want to liaise directly with them.

When president of the Association, Rick Naylor, then vice-

president, took on a new role of leading the project in 2002, under the BCU Liaison Business Area, he developed a database of all BCUs in England and Wales containing details of current post-holders. In 2003, the Home Office also acknowledged the growing importance of BCU liaison and this work was a significant part of the business case made to fully fund the position.

The database changes on a daily basis as forces continue to restructure and post-holders transfer to other posts or retire and has helped to map a picture of how structures are changing. For example, in January 2003, there were 319 BCUs in England and Wales compared to 250 in 2005.

But while the number of command units has decreased, they have also become much bigger. In fact, several BCUs, including Bristol, Nottinghamshire and some of the London boroughs have in excess of 1,000 police officers - more than in some of the smaller forces.

The number of superintendents has also risen and the Association has seen its membership swell from below 1,500 to nearly 1,600. We believe this is partly because forces made cut backs in the rank and then came to realise they had cut too deep. In some cases, while a number of BCUs have joined together to form a larger unit, they may have one chief superintendent but they could have a number of superintendents working below them heading up specific areas, such as Crime, Crime and Disorder Reduction Partnerships and Operations.

The database has been divided into the 14 most similar families of BCUs, based on factors such as population, crime load and whether they may be rural or urban forces. This has been done in consultation with the Home Office, Police Standards Unit Staff responsible for developing the I Quanta Performance Database.

Representatives from BCU families meet on a regular basis to discuss common problems and current challenges. This has served as a means for commanders and superintendents to share best practice and also features presentations relating to contemporary policing issues.

The database has been used to make sure commanders are aware of current policing issues and is regularly used by staff from the Home Office, Audit Commission, the Police Standards Unit and many others.

The resources has proved to be a very effective tool to consult and elicit views from senior police practitioners on many topics including:

1. Efficiency Savings
2. Alcohol Misuse Enforcement Campaign
3. Crack Houses
4. Delegation
5. Crime and Disorder Review
6. BCU Inspections
7. Prolific Offenders
8. Numerous Police Standards Unit Issues
9. Academic Research
10. Electronic Tagging

This gives an idea of how many BCUs are working together to tackle specific problems and how it has encouraged consistency across forces. When the Government was keen to launch the Alcohol Misuse Enforcement Campaign around the country - only a handful of forces responded. However, the database meant that commanders could be contacted directly and resulted in 230 of the 252 BCUs at the time, taking part in the initiative.

The future of policing continues to be a movable feast, but it is clear that BCUs are set to assume greater responsibility and with it greater pressure. Our aim is to be ready to meet the challenges ahead in whatever they may take.

Hopefully, this article has given a flavour of the ever-changing face of BCUs. Although it has not been possible to discuss all aspects in detail I will be happy to receive views or queries on the evolving role of Basic Command Units whether good, bad or indifferent.

Ian Johnston, vice-president of the Superintendents' Association and business area manager for BCU liaison, can be contacted at: ian.johnston@policesupers.com

The Superintendents' Association are due to hold their annual conference, *New Horizons*, at The Belfry Hotel, Warwickshire, this month from September 19 to September 22.

