


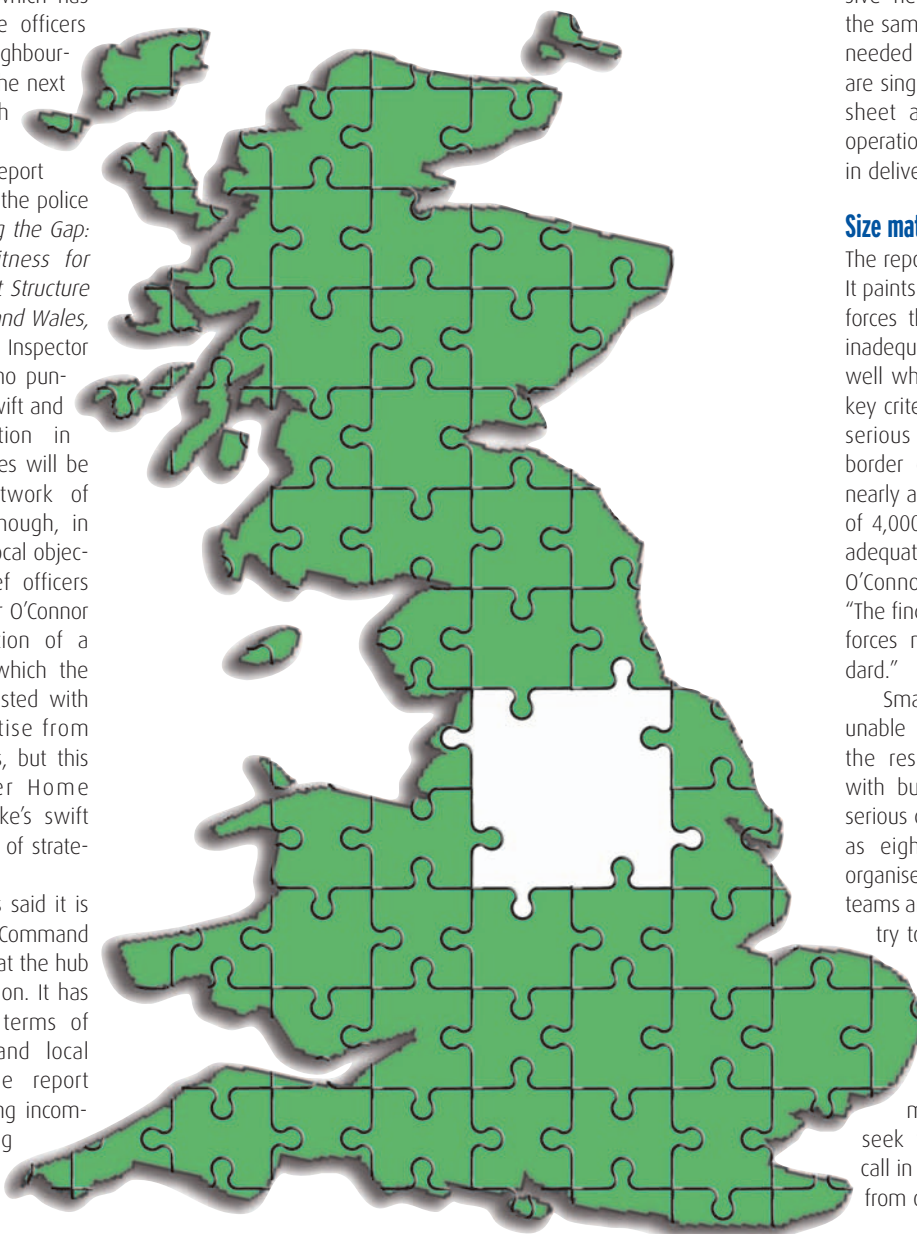
# Mind the gap

**The biggest shake-up in policing in more than 80 years is on the horizon following the publication of a report by the organisation that oversees the effectiveness and efficiency of police forces in England and Wales. A blueprint for the future service indicates that some smaller forces are likely to be merged with their larger counterparts. Tony Judge analyses the report and what it could mean for the future.**

 If you are an officer serving in a force which has less than 4,000 police officers you could be part of neighbouring constabulary over the next decade, perhaps much sooner.

The monumental report on the current state of the police service, entitled *Closing the Gap: A Review of the 'Fitness for Purpose' of the Current Structure of Policing in England and Wales*, by Denis O'Connor, HM Inspector of Constabulary, pulls no punches. It is a call for a swift and sweeping reconstruction in which the smaller forces will be absorbed into a network of "strategic" forces. Although, in anticipation of strong local objections from some chief officers and local politicians, Mr O'Connor leaves open the option of a "federal" system, in which the smaller forces are assisted with resources and expertise from their larger neighbours, but this looks unlikely after Home Secretary Charles Clarke's swift acceptance of the idea of strategic forces.

The Federation has said it is pleased that the Basic Command Unit (BCU) will remain at the hub of the police organisation. It has proved its worth in terms of police performance and local accountability. As the report states, "There is nothing incompatible between moving towards a strategic organisation and con-



centrating on delivering responsive neighbourhood policing at the same time". This said, care is needed to ensure that all BCUs are singing from the same hymn sheet and working in full co-operation with their neighbours in delivering common objectives.

## Size matters

The report says that size matters. It paints a dismal picture of police forces that, due largely to their inadequate size, fail to perform well when judged against seven key criteria, such as dealing with serious organised and cross-border crime. It concludes that nearly all forces below a strength of 4,000 officers, cannot provide adequate protective services. Mr O'Connor states in the report, "The findings are stark - very few forces meet the required standard."

Smaller forces are presently unable to devote anything like the resources needed to deal with burgeoning organised and serious crime. Some have as few as eight officers investigating organised crime, and these small teams are soon swamped as they try to react by operating on a one at a time basis when a strategic response is required. Many forces simply cannot cope with a sudden rise in murder cases and have to seek financial assistance and call in manpower and expertise from outside.

Recent events, notably in forces in Cambridgeshire and Humberside, relating to how police checks failed to prevent Ian Huntley gaining a job at a school, and Nottinghamshire, who admitted in the national press that they were struggling to cope with increasing numbers of murder investigations, have supplied Charles Clarke with a favourable wind for change. Another spur towards reform is the clear and present danger of terrorist attacks. Mr O'Connor says that some forces confronted with a terrorist incident could only manage for a few hours before requiring assistance. This, together with the growth of organised crime and concern about violence and anti-social behaviour in urban and rural locations, will ensure widespread public backing for police reforms that hold out the prospect of better all-round performance.

The report says that in the immediate future, besides having to deal with volume crime, the service must be effective against complex and volatile new threats to individuals, neighbourhoods and businesses. This calls for a major expansion of current capabilities and changes to the whole configuration of policing at this level. Service delivery must be scale large enough to respond dynamically, but remain local enough to understand the diverse context within which it operates.

The report identifies new demands on leadership, oversight and support from Government; counter terrorism and extremism; serious organised and cross border crime; civil contingencies and emergency planning; critical incident management: major crime (homicide): public order, and strategic roads policing.

### Stark findings

Mr O'Connor reports that the review team conducted a national assessment of the quality of the protective services provided by police forces above the BCU level. The assessment was made according to standards agreed with ACPO, and covered intelligence (what do we know about the issue?): prevention (what are

we doing to stop this?); and enforcement/resolution (what ability do we have to intervene effectively?).

He describes the findings as "stark". Very few forces met the required standard. It became apparent that the size of a force is a major factor. Larger forces are much more likely to provide the services to an acceptable standard, although Mr O'Connor stresses that being bigger is not enough to guarantee this. The environment plays a part, with for example, the presence of cities, ports or events giving a force valuable experience. He adds that some small forces, thanks to able leadership, are also able to punch above their weight in achieving a higher quality of service. Forces with major investigation teams performed better in dealing with major crime than those that did not have them. The team found that roads policing was overwhelmingly focussed on casualty reduction rather than reducing criminality. Intelligence was the aspect with the lowest scores, contrasting with the commitment to the National Intelligence Model (NIM) by forces at BCU level.

One chief officer has told the HM Inspectorate of Constabulary team that it was all very well highlighting Level 2, cross border, vulnerabilities, but what about performance? Mr O'Connor agrees that performance needs to be expanded to deal with protection. He says that protecting the public is at least as much about 'readiness to operate' as was evident in the response to the London bombings, as it is about conventional murders.

The report was, as is all too common these days, leaked extensively prior to publication. This, together with the emphasis on the negative aspects of current policing that were highlighted in the media, will have dismayed many officers in the smaller forces who have had to suffer virulent and often unjustified criticism by commentators relying on hindsight. This does not create a favourable climate in which officers can view their professional futures in the light of coming change.



### Radical blueprint?

What will be the effect of this report on policing as we have known it? I believe it to be the most far reaching blueprint for structural change since 1919, when the Police Act brought all forces within the ambit of

the Home Office and established national conditions of service along with the Federation. It is certainly, when coupled with the rest of the Police Reform project and the huge growth of central control of the service in recent years, more far reaching than the 1964 Police Act. Even so, media commentators who have criticised this Government's unremitting accretion of power to the centre have welcomed the suggestions made in the report, largely because it echoes the criticisms of police performance that they have been expressing for some time.

### Historical changes

This will be the third major structural change in police organisation since the 1962 Royal Commission. It is of interest to note that the Commission reported that there was a consensus among the witnesses it heard, that the optimum size of a police force was 500 officers! In the mid-1960s, Home Secretary Roy Jenkins announced his plan to reduce the 126 forces of that time to 49. This spelt the end of the majority of city and borough forces and ran into fierce resistance from the outraged local police authorities. The plan was deeply unpopular with rank and file officers in the forces scheduled for abolition, because they enjoyed conditions of service superior to county officers – owner occupation and no compulsory transfers. It took the Labour Government four years to get the plan through.

A major fault of the Jenkins' reforms was that the law allowed him only to merge complete forces. In this respect, the reform that followed the major reorgani-

sation of local government in the 1970s made better sense. The new metropolitan forces created then, survived Margaret Thatcher's abolition of the giant metropolitan county councils that had waged war against her policies.

But even then, the Federation warned that the new pattern of 43 forces included some that would not be able to police as effectively as others. So it has proved to be.

Much will depend on which major considerations weigh the heaviest when the boundaries of the new forces are being drawn up. Early press conjecture has come up with some projected mergers that would lump small forces together, but still leave them without the major conurbations that are essential if a force is to comply with the new dynamism at the heart of the report. It is already clear that there are some areas of Britain where fitting a force to the Denis O'Connor specifications is going to be very difficult. Moreover, the proposed fallback to a situation where a force borrows expertise and mentoring from a big brother force does not appear to be a geographical possibility. Doubtless, we will hear more about this aspect.

Officers in the forces most likely to be affected by this latest reform will need to be reassured that their own career prospects and working conditions will not be adversely affected. They should, through the local federation, be able to contribute their views to those responsible for defining the new police boundaries and the changes in police organisation above BCU level. Their on the ground experience is at least as relevant as those who have produced this crucial report. They may even claim to have a more altruistic interest in the future of the service than those with a vested interest in opportunities for career advancement. Chief officers and the Home Secretary should welcome the involvement of rank and file officers; they are the ultimate professionals of British policing.

