

# Paper weight

Frustrated police officers want to see the custody process streamlined, activity-based costing scrapped and a move back to discretion, according to a report looking at how to slash bureaucracy in the service



Jan Berry

The report, by Jan Berry, appointed by the Home Office as the independent reducing bureaucracy advocate, focuses mainly on the recommendations in Sir *Ronnie Flanagan's Review of Policing*. Mrs Berry, former chairman of the Police Federation, was controversially offered the post when she stepped down from the Federation. Part of the reason it was controversial was because she had been involved in a

fairly vociferous debate with Home Secretary Jacqui Smith over the police pay deal. Not the most likely source of a job offer. But, she says, being a police officer for nearly 40 years and working on behalf of officers, she wanted to ensure she remained independent from the Home Office, a promise which appears to have been adhered to - so far. She admits that her next report may be more likely to raise the hackles at Whitehall, possibly.

"This is not what I would call a robust report, it is an interim report, I am looking at where we are, where do we need to get to and where are some of the roots for getting there," she says.

Six recommendations in the report include getting rid of activity-based costing, which requires officers to record what they are doing every 15 minutes, this was described as 'time-wasting and pointless'. The Home Office have since acted on this recommendation and claim culling the ABC scheme saves 260,000 police hours. Another recommendation is that all officers should benefit from Airwave radio to record a stop and account verbally making it a quicker process. The

system should also have a GPRS locator, which will be able to pinpoint an officer's location, which she says will improve on officer safety as well as aiding accountability. The final recommendation is that consideration be given to a pilot in a force to extend police charging powers to include all summary offences, regardless of plea, a move designed to make the process more efficient.

Mrs Berry says the report also takes into account what officers on the frontline have told her following focus groups, held back in December, to look at bureaucracy bug bears and what could be done to tackle them.

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Officers highlighted the custody process as being the most bureaucratic, as well as venting frustration over activity based costing and sanction detection/discretion issues and duplication of forms.

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She tells *Police*: "Ever since I was an operational officer some years ago, I could never see the benefit of activity-based costing. We never saw any results. That was my experience as a police officer."

Mrs Berry says that as she travelled around the forces and asked officers 'if you could write one paragraph in my report what would you say' many answered they would question the use and get rid of activity-based costing. The report highlights problems between the police and Crown Prosecution Service (CPS), partly conflicting targets, and issues over resources which can mean officers waiting around for solicitors or being unable to call anyone at weekends or after 5pm, not particularly convenient when criminals don't work within office hours.





Cutting down: officers want a move back to discretion and less paperwork

Mrs Berry is in discussions with the attorney general and CPS over how this can be resolved.

She adds: "I sat in one custody suite and watched two PCs waiting two hours to discuss a £2.47 shoplifting offence. They had a pre-arranged an appointment with a lawyer. We have to look at ways to improve this. But we also have to remember why charging was removed from the police in the first place as some of the evidence gathering was not up to standard or not timely. If we can provide that so that the CPS, who also has to find resources, can build capacity and a capable system, they can focus on serious and complicated cases."

Mrs Berry also believes that although the Police Federation always pushed for politics to stay out of policing, aside from operational decisions, she thinks it is right that the Home Secretary can mandate chief officers on a more strategic level to improve efficiency for officers on the ground. She says 'we have messed about with IT long enough', and that all forces should work from the same operating platform so information can be collected and shared.

"If you were running a company and had a system in that company, you would not expect five different systems that do not talk to each other. For example, if you are going into a custody suite and transferring a person from one to another, you should not have to fill out different forms. Other organisations must think we are stark raving mad. You could have a complimentary system across the CJS."

Another recommendation in the *Review of Policing* report refers to a need to cut the amount of information recorded for more minor crimes. The report indicates that the drive for officers to get sanction detections in order to hit targets led to criminalising people for minor detections when it could have been dealt with in a more informal way, where the officer uses their own discretion. A new streamlined way of recording crime has been piloted in Staffordshire, Leicestershire, West Midlands and Surrey Police.

Mrs Berry would like to see this rolled-out: "Certainly in areas where it is working, officers love it. I have spoken to groups of officers who have said that if you removed their ability to choose discretion they would not want to stay on in the job. I think it is interesting that officers who have been in the job for some time feel they are going back to do the type of policing they first came into the job to do. The ones brought up on target culture do not have the same experience to make good judgements and are more comfortable counting numbers but that will change if they have the opportunity to gain experience."

Sir Ronnie also called an end to lengthy stop and account forms in his report and in January this year, they were replaced by a 'receipt' of the stop and a verbal record on Airwave that an encounter has taken place, including the person's ethnicity.

Mrs Berry said that cutting back on bureaucracy was not just about form-filling but a whole array of issues, such as 'lean-thinking', nothing to do with psychological dieting

apparently, but about forces being efficient and eliminating waste. Yet, even though officers could have been using the new shorter stop and account process, some of those she spoke to, including those in senior posts, did not know that stop and account forms had changed.

"We have to work out a way of communicating these things to the frontline, it's not just about cutting down paper, it's about a different way of thinking," she says.

If all this talk of bureaucracy makes you feel depressed and grab for the doughnuts, remember 'lean thinking'.