

# Coping with the cuts

Cuts in the policing budget seem inevitable, but what, asks Professor Peter Latchford, will that mean in real terms - a knee-jerk reduction in 'non-core' policing, or new opportunities?

Budget cuts are a certainty for the police. The question now is, how should they be implemented? Is there a way of reducing police resources which minimises the impact on frontline effectiveness?

Standard budget cutting approaches will not work: they tend to focus on cutting out 'non-core' activities such as relationship or neighbourhood-based approaches, reducing 'non-essential' items such as training budgets, and requiring managers to implement an across-the-board reduction by a given percentage.

All three approaches are potentially deeply damaging. Neighbourhood policing may look non-core from a senior management level, but it has been shown to be fundamental to the change in culture among

communities which reduces crime in the first place. What could be more core to the policing role than to help design-out crime?

A reduction in training budgets and other soft internal spends will undermine the ability of the officer on the street to respond with increasing sophistication to the challenges faced in contemporary policing, and will reduce the diversity of people within the force. And the management-driven, across-the-board reduction approach inevitably protects the management classes at the expense of the front line – after all turkeys don't vote for Christmas.

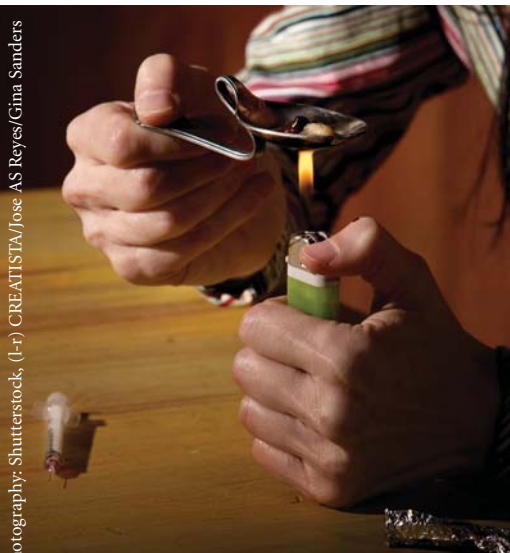
## The domino effect

It's not only police budgets which should interest the police. Across the

wider public sector, if budgets are cut in the normal manner, those most in need will suffer the most. There will be an escalation in poverty, ill health and social tension, particularly in our overcrowded and high maintenance urban areas.

When inequality grows, particularly when the poorest get poorer, everybody suffers, even the rich – not least through increased levels of crime. If this coincides with a reduction in frontline policing resourcing, our society will face a double whammy.

What we need instead is bravery and imagination. As a nation we are rightly concerned to ensure that our policing is of good quality. Over time, this has been translated into an emphasis on a command and control, hierarchical model of management,



Would changing our approach to narcotics reduce health problems, prostitution and drug-related thefts?



plus an audit trail process that requires hefty bureaucratic servicing. Both activities – management and paperwork – are expensive.

We should be asking whether there are other forms of quality assurance that can be employed more effectively and more cheaply. Wikipedia uses the customer for quality control, academics use peer review, and health professionals are kept in check by professional standards bodies. Do these models offer an alternative approach for some facets of policing? Clearly the current structure is the only sensible way to approach some functions – rapid response activities, for instance – but not all.

### A change of perspective

We should be looking to reduce the burden on police by reducing the number of things that are considered to be crimes. Though this is contentious, the stakes are high.

We have to ask ourselves whether our drugs strategy has worked. Should we, as many drugs professionals argue, stop treating drug use as a crime and start treating it as an illness? We could legitimise the production of narcotic drugs under licence and, by so doing, significantly increase the quality and safety of the substances. This would reduce the health and financial costs to users, and have a substantial impact on drug-related theft, prostitution and health problems.

We also need to cast out the false gods of planning which have dominated public sector activity for a decade or more. For some years, senior police officers have been struggling with the default planning approach taken in local strategic



Investing in social capital could help in the long term to deliver lower crime rates

partnerships. For example, public sector plans for economic development, community safety and community cohesion are typically built by centralised ‘big-brained’ people, based on copious amounts of ‘objective’ data, following exhaustive consultation with people who think similarly. By the time the plan is packaged and launched, it is often irrelevant, and may have little connection with what actually happens on the ground.

### Investing in social capital

If what we are interested in is a reduced burden on the public purse, greater well-being among local people, and – yes – the recapitalisation of poor people, then we should invest in social capital. We should be exploring new models for investing public and

private sector cash in building social glue. It may be less easy to point at than a new hospital, but if brands can be valued on a corporate balance sheet, why can't social capital? And we know that high social capital means low crime.

In short, there is a danger that this budget results in an under-investment in the empowering themes that will deliver efficiency and fairness and lower crime rates. If it does fail in this way, we will see a medium to long-term rise in the social morbidities which cost the public purse so dear.

We will only know whether we are eating the seedcorn when we see how the government departments react to the reductions in budget – with imagination, or with the traditional protection of existing structures.

*Peter Latchford is the CEO and founder of fairness and effectiveness specialists, Black Radley. He specialises in challenge facilitation, strategy development, complex project leadership, stakeholder management, partnership development and local government shared services. He has worked with central government, local government and with public sector agencies across a number of disciplines. Peter is also a visiting professor of enterprise at the Birmingham City University.*

