

Policing and the recession

Politicians, journalists and academics are all debating how to deliver better value for money, but ahead of the Police Foundation's conference on policing in times of austerity, Foundation director John Graham explains why reduced budgets could present greater opportunities



Banks and the credit crunch were one focus of the G20 protests, but the tough economy could have a much longer lasting effect on policing

Talk of cuts in public services has become endemic. Politicians, civil servants, senior managers, journalists and even academics are discussing how best to make efficiency savings, increase productivity and deliver better value for money. The private sector will expand as the public sector shrinks. We are entering new territory.

Recently, the Audit Commission published a report entitled *Sustaining value for money in the police service*. Although the title is presumptuous – there is, as the report itself states, no evidence that high spending is delivering improved productivity – it usefully pinpoints the areas where savings can be made. Suggesting what

it refers to as a transformational approach, it indicates that savings can be made 'by linking policing priorities to resource management', but this surely begs the question why on earth wasn't this done before? As Richard Lambert, Director-General of the CBI said in the Police Foundation's John Harris Memorial Lecture last year, if

you consistently throw money at a problem, you never need to demonstrate value for money. And the police service can hardly complain that it hasn't had money thrown at it over the last two decades.

The Audit Commission's advice, while appreciated, fails to state the obvious, which is that there must be considerable scope for savings simply through identifying clearly what these priorities are and cutting out all the extraneous activities the service has collected or been dumped with over the years. Perhaps it's time to put a stop to mission drift, to return to core functions, to resist the temptation to do everything and be everywhere, to learn to say "no" and not always say "yes", to be a 'can't do' service and not always a (very exploitable) 'can do' one.

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In early September, the Police Foundation will be holding its first Annual Conference. The theme, like so many conferences these days, is about the effective delivery of public services in a period of austerity. But it will be both similar to and also different from the others. As well as identifying the challenges, it will also explore the opportunities. Radical reforms which have been needed for some time may now be easier to achieve, not least force collaboration and, dare one say it, force mergers. Creating space for innovation is difficult at the best of times, but more so when resources are being squeezed. What are other public services or indeed other countries faced with the same problems doing? Putting forward innovative strategies and ideas for improving efficiency

and productivity are all very well, but how will they be achieved while simultaneously resourcing an unprecedented security operation – the Olympic Games?

In the health sector, the government's new proposals will deliver greater private sector involvement as GPs take on the commissioning of health services and outsourcing companies take over much of the back office functions in GP surgeries. This has led to a heated discussion about who will benefit – shareholders or taxpayers, professionals or clients – and whether “the privatisation of the health service” must inevitably lead to conflicts of interest and lower quality services being delivered by poorly trained, lower paid and smaller workforces. The Chief Executive of Capita said recently that he would be deeply disappointed if its take from the outsourcing of government services doesn't double in the next five years. Does this matter? How will this affect the ordinary man-in-the-street? The same ethical discussion, which will be addressed at the Annual Conference, needs to be embraced by the policing sector. What will a leaner, smaller, police force look like and how might its values change?

It is important, in the rush to make cuts, not to lose sight of the consequences they may have for ordinary human beings, not just for balancing the books.

England and Wales spends a higher proportion of its GDP on law and order than any other member of the OECD. Comparative research undertaken in 16 European countries shows that the greater the proportional expenditure on public order and safety, the lower the level of public trust in the police. The implication of this is both sobering and encouraging.

Investing in public safety makes people feel more, not less insecure, leading to further investment in public safety and more, not less insecurity. Maybe, above all else, the budget cuts will take us to a completely unexpected place where trust in the police service, and therefore its legitimacy, is considerably enhanced. You heard it from the Police Foundation first.

The Police Foundation Conference, 'Policing and the Recession', takes place at the BT Auditorium and Customer Showcase in London on Tuesday 7 September



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Radical reforms to deliver best value could be easier to achieve because of budget pressures