



Looking to the future

The New Year will ring in many changes. Police officers will have to contend with falling numbers, the Olympics and the introduction of police and crime commissioners as well as the future role of ACPO. Sara Thornton, vice-president of ACPO talks to Syreeta Lund about some of the challenges for the year ahead

Firstly, I am told, ACPO will be neither a “merger or a demise” although what is certain is that entering 2012 a question mark has been hanging over exactly what its new functions will be as Home Secretary Theresa May

announced there will be a new police professional body to develop professional skills and leadership. Ms Thornton, who is also director of the Police National Assessment Centre, which is used as a means to

identify ‘future leaders’, says: “We have been in several meetings with the police minister to talk about what a police professional body will look like. I think the idea of a professional body for policing is a very exciting

idea but I think it will take several years to get there.”

The Home Secretary’s announcement came on the back of the review of police leadership and training by Peter Neyroud in April last year in which he suggested a national professional body for policing to oversee standards. He also suggested police officers paying a yearly licence of £50 and chief constables £250. How will police officers feel about that? “I would hope the police professional body is something people want to join. We need to think how to make it attractive. People in the profession of policing will see it as a good thing to be involved with,” she says.

Many police officers will feel that they are already part of a profession; does she believe policing is a profession? “I do. There are three things that differentiate a profession; a body of expert knowledge, some degree of autonomy and independent action,” she says, and policing is founded on the Office of Constable and has its own ethical standards and principles.

Ms Thornton says they are interested in improving the policing profession and “how the public and politicians view us” and believes that if the professional standards were clearer there may not even be a debate around direct entry into the service.

“The reason I am not in favour of direct entry is because we have professional experts – it’s not the case that any other manager can just wag up and do it. One day you are a manager at Boots or wherever and the next day you are an inspector.”

Although she does concede that she could be persuaded that with a few years training someone from outside the organisation may be able to step into the rank.

Changes to the way police officers enter into the service could also dramatically change the dynamics. Neyroud’s report also suggests a pre-entry qualification before entering the service; some recruits already complete policing degrees and also work as Special Constables as they

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undertake

their degrees. The Federation has raised concerns that this will impact on the diversity of the service, potentially excluding some recruits who cannot afford to pay for a degree or commit the time as they have caring responsibilities.

As chief constable of Thames Valley Police, Ms Thornton says they are moving towards many recruits having a foundation degree in policing, but “that is not the only way in”. She says that from this year the force will be taking half their 200 recruits with a foundation degree and half without as they do not want to isolate sections of the population. Students carrying out the degree will also be Special Constables for two years so they are ‘fit for independent foot patrol’ at the end of their studies. She says it’s in the public interest to have the number of students with the right level of knowledge entering the service but also to have equality of access.

Another big change that forces will still have to contend with this year is the fall in police numbers. Many forces still have a freeze on recruitment and have not replaced those leaving or retiring and in some cases, officers have been forced to leave under A19.

“The police service is being asked to reduce its budgets and we all understand why that is. Demand is not being reduced by the equivalent percentage but everyone in the country will have worked as hard as we have without cutting the service,” she tells *Police* magazine.

In Thames Valley she says that the frontline has not taken the brunt of cuts; neighbourhood policing teams have not been reduced in four years and they have actually increased, but savings have had to be made and the force increasingly collaborates with Hampshire – they share information management, ICT and have joint operations. The force has also taken out the Basic Command Unit level of management so they do not have as many command posts. And, surprisingly, the force is still

recruiting – 200 posts each year for the next three years, a rarity in these times. When asked if she felt cutting neighbourhood teams, something she was credited with introducing into Thames Valley, would affect the relationship with the public, she quickly replies: “Of course it does which is why we haven’t cut those.”

“What worries me is that policing will be discussed (coming up to elections) and I will find it very difficult if candidates are saying things about my force which are unfair..”

As vice-chair of ACPO’s Terrorism and Allied Matters committee, does Ms Thornton think there are enough officers to police the Olympics effectively, specifically specialist officers with specific skills? She believes the service can meet the challenge and that there has been a great deal of planning for the policing of the event at both a national and local level and there are enough specialist officers at both levels. But, she adds that numbers need to be constantly revisited depending on threat levels and other events, such as the August riots.

In the light of the outbreak of rioting, she says she is sure we will have enough police support units, with police officers with specialist public order training, if they need to ‘press the button’.

Other issues on the horizon for Ms Thornton include a mission to consolidate all the guidance and advice available for police officers – more than 600 – under the banner of Authorised Professional Practice (APP) which may sound a little on the dry side but which could revolutionise how officers access the information. They are looking to make it available on mobile devices so potentially you could download the latest guidance on policing public order situations on a



Sara Thornton, chief constable of Thames Valley Police, received her CBE from The Queen at Windsor Castle last May, in recognition of her services to policing

Photography: Martin Keane / PA Wire

Blackberry or even a Kindle.

“If we expect police officers to have a picture of what exists, it is not possible at the moment. What we are doing is going through all that within the ACPO business areas, subject matter etc. with a view to reducing the volume of doctrine quite considerably, it’s not new, and we are just consolidating and prioritising it.”

Essentially ACPO and the NPIA hope to ensure there is clear relevant guidance for officers which is concise and can be found in the same place.

The information will be under the heading of APP and will be split into two areas; core areas such as intelligence and information management – which is an expanding area as increasingly more information is being held on computers and in the wake of high-profile cases where a lack of information sharing was apparent as in the Huntley case, it is increasingly important. There will also be specialist areas such as domestic extremism, protecting vulnerable people or major crime. It’s really important that we have national standards.”

ACPO and the NPIA will use an ‘intuitive’ piece of software which will allow officers to access the information on their computers and hand-held devices.

Another challenge for the year ahead will be the introduction of police and crime commissioners. Will they improve the relationship between the police and the public and open lines of communication or hinder the service and pursue their own political agendas?

“I think PCCs will work as long as they are about what the public want and they leave how up to chief constables, officers and staff. I am very concerned to make sure our direction, control and responsibility in law is protected. A key aspect of policing is without fear or favour,” she says.

Any suggestion of the party political involvement would threaten the great tradition of British policing, she adds.

Finally, would Katie Price (aka Jordan) make a good candidate? “I would suggest people are trying to drum up interest by naming people like Katie Price,” But, she says, whoever is elected by the people she will work with them.

She does add a word of warning which could sound slightly menacing to potential candidates: “What worries me is that policing will be discussed (coming up to elections) and I will find it very difficult if candidates are saying things about my force which are unfair, but I’ll be consistent about what I’ll do about that.”