

# View from the vice-chair

With police budgets set to come under pressure from politicians, Federation vice-chairman Simon Reed warns that huge cuts will inevitably damage services



Simon Reed, vice-chairman of the Police Federation

Within a few days of taking office, police minister Nick Herbert announced a cut in the police grant of £125 million – a cut the minister claims is less than one per cent of the total policing budget. But with the increasing number of issues to tackle ranging from terrorism to anti-social behaviour and a high expectation from the public, it's clear that the police service will be expected to do more for less.

Indeed, at our annual conference in May, Mr Herbert told us: "Our ambition will be to protect the frontline and make certain that is the last call on the savings we make. All public services will have to find savings... and deliver more for less."

The government says it will target any cuts at inefficient quangos, bureaucracy, back office staff and overtime budgets in the first instance. However, as police budgets continue to shrink, more and more forces are cutting – not just the number crunchers in back rooms who sated the hunger of the previous government's obsession with performance targets, but also police officers, albeit through recruitment freezes in some cases.

Let's be honest, policing is expensive. It's an essential function to maintain law and order and protect the public, but with an allocated budget of around £12.6 billion, it is far from the most costly. When you look at it in the context of the wider economy it is small change; the NHS spending is around £120 billion this year, and education £80 billion, according to the IFS.

Prior to the Emergency Budget, government figures suggested that they would need to borrow in the region

of £155 billion this year. This was on top of the current and existing debt of around £771.5 billion. Forecasters predicted that within a few years the total debt will double to around £1.2 trillion. Such figures are mind boggling and so are the interest payments of around £60 billion a year. Fixing the debt problem will require deep and prolonged cuts, as the Chancellor indicated in his Budget statement – but where?

If there was to be no spending on the police for five years, that would only pay the interest on the debt for one year; yet what would be the real cost – a reduced service to the public? The initial proposed cuts in police funding, and the inevitable deeper cuts to follow, will be a serious challenge to the provision of an effective police service.

We also know that there is to be a review of our terms of conditions, a commission on public sector pensions to be led by former Labour minister John Hutton, and a review of fair pay in the public sector by the economist Will Hutton. These reviews may have the potential to save millions, but not the billions that the figures suggest are required. The real danger is that they have the potential to cause serious harm to policing which is disproportionate to any savings made, and may be offset by additional expenditure somewhere else in the system, for example if crime rises during recession.

Officers are unique in the sense that they put their lives in danger every day to protect the public. This month will see many 'ordinary' police officers being honoured for carrying out 'extraordinary acts' at our Police Bravery Awards.

Whatever decisions are made, I think I can say with some confidence that the next few years are going to be tough and some difficult decisions will inevitably have to be made. But those decisions should also take account of public expectations and confidence in the police. The introduction of elected police commissioners and more direct accountability to the public could also focus demands.

We, as always, will do our best to deliver a high standard of service in a variety of areas, but with huge cuts comes a warning label; it goes without saying that some services will suffer.