

It's not all doom and gloom?

19
Feature

Your pay is under threat, you spend your days chasing sanction detections for trivial offences and your job seems to be under increasing threat from civilianisation. Do you feel valued? Syreeta Lund interviews police minister Tony McNulty to find out what's happening to the role of the police officer

According to police minister Tony McNulty it's not 'all doom and gloom' for police officers. The first part of the report, *Fair Pay for Police Officers*, carried out by government-appointed Sir Clive Booth in February, refers to a number of factors which affect the morale of police officers: job satisfaction, team spirit, recognition for achievement and last but not least, financial rewards.

He states in the report 'motivation and morale are most likely to be high when all these factors operate positively across the work force'.

So what does your average bobby have to look forward to? Mr McNulty was as keen to discuss the recent pay talks as he would be to engage in a conversation about the score for his favourite football team, West Ham, as they stared relegation in the face after a recent match with Chelsea.

He diplomatically said it would be 'remiss to have input, as a minister, on the [issue of pay] Police Negotiating Board', where a pay agreement is hammered out for officers.

I ask why his boss Home Secretary John Reid then felt it necessary to take the unusual step of 'directing' the 'independent' Police Negotiation Board to come to an agreement on police pay with an expectation that Sir Clive's recommendations will form the basis for negotiations?



Photography: Andrew Carruth



Mr McNulty simply says: “He has set a framework for a (PNB) meeting which is right and proper.”

But is it right and proper to set a framework for the meeting if negotiation is essentially supposed to be an independent matter?

Mr Reid can only use this specific power when he feels it is a matter of ‘serious national importance for the police service’, or, a cynic may suggest, perhaps when the government is looking to impose public sector pay awards within their inflation target of two per cent, one of the recommendations included in Sir Clive’s independent report.

Mr McNulty tells *Police* magazine he would like to get to a stage where police officers are recognised for ‘putting their lives on the line’ but adds that there is an overall public pay policy and PNB will need to determine this round within the ‘context of that policy’.

This all sounds like a bit of a done deal, but Mr McNulty is adamant that all aspects of the recommendations in the report are still negotiable at PNB.

What else is up for grabs when it comes to the role of the beleaguered Bobby? Is the government looking to oust officers completely in years to come with the plethora of civilianised roles, freezing of recruitment for police officers and pressure on police budgets across the country?

“In general terms the role of the constable, as everyone understands it, is absolutely central to policing and isn’t going to change,” says Mr McNulty.

He believes there are areas where ‘we can and should’ be using warranted police officers but that there are also functions that ‘could be done by other people, like civilian support staff’. He uses the example of civilian jailers but there are now moves to introduce custody officers something the Police Federation has expressed concerns about. The main issues, say the Federation, are that the role of the custody sergeant requires a great deal of legal knowledge and skills as the person who holds the key to a person’s liberty.

“In general terms the role of the constable, as everyone understands it, is absolutely central to policing and isn’t going to change.”

Mr McNulty says that the custody suites he has visited where civilians are being used also have police supervision and that the fears of some Federation members have now been ‘allayed’. He added that the pilots are still being looked at as to whether they have worked and how effective they have been.

Community support officers are part of the government’s ‘modernisation’ agenda of the police service and have been deemed effective by the government. Yet, in some areas, police officers say that because they lack powers, such as

the power of arrest, they end up creating more work for the police. What would Mr McNulty think was a good solution to this problem?

He states that CSOs are supplementary, that they do have a limited set of powers, at the discretion of their chief constable. He adds they 'would not want to go down the road of affording them powers where they would be able to do everything a police officers can, partly because of the extra training and equipment they would need'.

He adds that CSOs will not become 'warranted officers on the cheap' adding 'not on my watch'.

Another factor which will impact greatly on forces and, as *Police* magazine featured in the news pages of last month's edition, is already taking a chunk out of police numbers, are the budget cuts to police authorities.

In Leicestershire, Kevin Allcock, chairman of the local federation, said that they have already seen reduced police officer numbers of around 100 through a freeze on recruitment and officers leaving not being replaced.

“Targets and holding every force to account for performance are important but the performance framework needs to measure what it purports to measure.”

Mr McNulty said that after 'nine or ten years of significant growth in policing' numbers are now 'flat lining or going down or going up in far smaller numbers. It's a very real question that police forces need to look at'.

But he says it not all 'doom and gloom' and he wants to work with the Federation and chief constables to determine 'what is the most appropriate level in terms of numbers for that force'.

He carefully adds that it is not for him to determine how many officers there should be in a response unit, for example, that 'optimum' numbers are a matter for each force. If forces are finding they have a big problem with resources then 'they should come and see me,' he adds.

The crime fighting fund, previously ring-fenced for police officers, can now be used by chiefs for community support officers, who will cost the force less but do not have the same levels of training.

"I know there have been some concerns but some forces have said we cannot work within these stringent [funding] frameworks," says Mr McNulty.

The government originally planned for 24,000 CSOs to be in place by 2008, but this number has since dropped to 16,000. However, Mr McNulty believes it is not up to the government to dictate from the centre how many police officers there are in every force.

"We cannot just say, have flexibility on resources whilst being strict about what policing looks like," he explains.

However, he does say that it is not that the level of police officers is not a concern to the government, 'of course



it is' and that if the fund worked in a 'negative way' they would go back and look at it again.

In relation to police officers' levels of morale, sanction detections are also a big issue which come up time and again within forces where police officers are pressured to hit targets.

"Targets and holding every force to account for performance are important but the performance framework needs to measure what it purports to measure."

"If there are perverse incentives," he says, that is something the government need to look at.

So, police pay still hangs in the balance, the government may look at sanction detections, CSOs are here to stay, forces will have to cope with budget cuts, where does that leave the issue of police officer morale?

How will forces attract new police recruits into the service, keeping in mind Sir Clive's comments on financial rewards and promotion?

Mr McNulty says: "I would like to get to a stage where targets, bureaucracy and the performance framework is helping police officers to do their job, rather than getting in the way."

He adds that he would like the media and local and national politicians to afford the police the respect they deserve and understand the risks they face on the streets.

I imagine many police officers would agree with his sentiments, but if they see their pay packets diminishing, they may feel respect is the last thing on the government's agenda.