



Alan Gordon, vice-chairman of the Police Federation and chairman of the Futures Group

Fighting to protect 24/7 response policing

This will come as no surprise to every one of the 140,000 police officers throughout England and Wales, and even less of a surprise to those at the sharp end of our 24/7 response – the thin blue line is at breaking point. And new government objectives and targets are just making the job of responding to emergency calls more and more difficult, with many response teams often understaffed and falling below minimum levels, leaving officers and the public in potential danger.

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Whilst the Police Federation is entirely supportive of community policing and the constable being at the heart of it, our research clearly shows that the government target of every BCU having a neighbourhood policing team in place by spring 2008 is placing a tremendous burden on frontline officers tackling the growing number of 999 calls. Contrary to government plans the neighbourhood policing teams are not tackling all local issues, but actually creating even greater demand on the already overstretched 24/7 cover.

Then to top it all, overworked 24/7 officers are facing a backlash from middle England, many now finding themselves criminalised by the lunacy of government targets for sanction detections. This was epitomised at the Kent Police Federation open meeting last month when an officer stood up and, with a straight face, told the gathered troops that someone on his team had been called to a school to arrest a child who had taken a bit of cucumber out of a sandwich and thrown it at a fellow pupil. I defy the Home Secretary to tell us that was a good use of our time.

The research also highlighted a number of conflicting demands the government’s police reform programme has brought about. Whether it is the Home Office’s alleged commitment to invest in front line policing when the reality is depleted and often inexperienced 24/7 teams; or a promise to free up officers by reducing bureaucracy when many of the management systems used by forces are heavily based on bureaucratic procedures. These contradictions in policy and promise do nothing to lift the spirits of demoralised and under valued 24/7 response officers.

But what is really frightening for the future of the service and for the safety of the public is that 24/7 response teams have the highest leaving rates. This means that those called upon to be first on the scene to deal with anything from a serious sexual assault to a terrorist incident are usually young in service with the least operational experience. This must be addressed now - the government must stop their piecemeal approach to reform of the service and chief officers must have the courage to do what is right for policing.