



Paul Tonks, chairman of the West Mids Police Federation

Local focus

Local focus is the first in a series of columns from federation branches around the country to look at the issues affecting police officers in their area.

Paul Tonks writes on the subject of force mergers and neighbourhood policing.

Within West Midlands Police and the forces immediately surrounding us we are certainly in the thick of the action in relation to police reform and force amalgamations. In some ways that is quite an exciting, though daunting prospect, in other ways I also find it a tad frustrating. Prior to the most recent announcement from the Home Secretary, I was of the view that the decisions regarding amalgamations were primarily to do with policing rather than politics. How wrong I was.

On March 3 the Home Office announced the final runners and riders in the amalgamation stakes and we saw that all forces finally subjected to the process were well north of Watford, all were politically labour strongholds and none were to include areas where there was an obvious need for amalgamations. There are also those forces caught short with level 2 crime or where there are other issues, such as the recent Soham investigation, whereby there were obvious shortfalls in investigative capacity. Only time will tell whether further amalgamations will be entered into, but whatever happens, my view is that this initial list of forces announced by the Home Secretary can only be deemed as political 'soft targets'.

From our perspective, the entire issue of the introduction of the neighbourhood policing model has been a bit of a nightmare. The implications of the introduction of the neighbourhood policing model are potentially great on frontline operational officers, impacting directly on our working conditions. I would have thought that given the core remit of the federation, i.e. assisting with the welfare and efficiency of the service, that this would have been a prime role for us to be involved and assisting with. Sadly, with the exception of a small number of operational command units, federation input, both locally and centrally has been virtually nil and I have to confess to total despair as to why that has been the case. Since becoming chairman of

the West Midlands Federation, I have made it a personal quest to ensure that the working relationship between this federation and the force has been one that is seen as positive and supportive, while at the same time representing colleagues fairly and robustly.

I am of the view that we are now witnessing the fallout from a total lack of federation involvement. It is obvious that senior management are placing great emphasis on the neighbourhood policing model to the extent that, in my opinion, it is possibly to the detriment of the frontline response officers. Number crunching of officer numbers appears to have become a fine art over the last few months, more to do with political appeasement, rather than workload and welfare. Let's be brutally honest, neighbourhood policing as I understand it has been with us as a service for many years, the only real difference being that years ago the officers involved in that type of policing were affectionately known as permanent beat officers (PBOs). The analogy reminds me of a few years ago when I tried to buy a Marathon chocolate bar only to find that it's name had changed to Snickers.... turned out to be exactly the same product with a different name.