

Turning

With the recent government decision to put force mergers on hold, Tony Judge finds Humberside police facing an uncertain future.

John Reid's politically astute decision to ditch, at least for now, the mass restructuring of police forces, may have been well received in many parts of England and Wales, but it leaves some forces facing a very uncertain future.

For Humberside Police, the mergers plan arrived when the force was going through traumatic problems for which a marriage with Yorkshire's two Metropolitan forces and North Yorkshire seemed to provide practical solutions.

When a new pattern of police forces began in the 1970s, Humberside appeared from the start to be a somewhat artificial creation. It has wide tracts of affluent areas in the former East Riding, but these contrast with conditions in other districts. Hull has a resident population of around 250,000, swollen during the day by commuters to half a million. It does not figure in the rich list of British cities. It has all the problems of inner-cities, in particular, a thriving drugs trade, dominated by ruthless criminal elements from Merseyside and Greater Manchester. Hull's greatest days as a bustling international port are over, and though there are still some reminders of a more prosperous past in the faded grandeur of Victorian buildings in the city centre, the modern reality is of high levels of social deprivation.

This leads to high volume minor crimes perpetrated to get drugs money. Police teams regularly mount operations that result in arrests and confiscations, but the problem persists.

These conditions are mirrored, in a smaller scale in other small towns dotted around the force, including Grimsby, Scunthorpe and Goole. Hull also has a national reputation as a violent city, although local officers told me that most violent crimes in the city are fuelled by alcohol, and are of a

relatively trivial nature. Hull does not come near the levels of homicide and gun crimes in Nottingham and other similar sized midland and northern cities.

The year of 2004 was Humberside's 'annus horribilis.' The Bichard Inquiry probed the intelligence blunder that left Cambridgeshire in the dark about the Soham killer, Ian Huntley, and the then Home Secretary David Blunkett insisted on the immediate suspension of Humberside's chief constable. About this time, the Policing Standards Unit was parachuted into Humberside to investigate its organisation and operational practices. It was coincidental misfortune that Humberside, which had been holding its own among similar forces, was placed in a new grouping and was immediately deemed to be failing.

The view of Humberside Police Federation was that the main cause of the force's parlous condition in 2004 was the headlong rush to reorganise its entire resources to pursue the Home Office's flavour of the season; geographical policing.

The Federation believes that the management style that then existed attempted to revolutionise policing overnight. Senior officers were warned that total compliance was required from them.

This is best illustrated by the drive to push down the high sickness rates. Officers were subjected to an attendance test which affected selection for promotion and specialist posts, and competency-related threshold payments and special priority post payments, even overtime. This achieved the desired result by bringing down the annual sickness rate from 13.1 days per year to 6.1 per cent, but part of this achievement was due to a climate of fear that led officers to take leave when they were unfit for duty.

the tide



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The changes led to the virtual abolition of CID and Traffic as separate departments, and the breaking up of teams of operational officers who had worked well and effectively together. It left inexperienced investigating officers in charge of major crimes, and as the force became overwhelmed with the sheer volume of reported crime, a huge backlog was built up. Morale slumped alarmingly, as did performance. The HMI's, who had been solidly behind the scheme, were horrified by what they saw

during inspections and the Home Office sent in the PSU and management consultants.

Humberside Police Federation had consistently warned that the upheaval was producing the opposite result to that it had intended. Jon Savage, chairman of Humberside Federation, told their 2004 annual meeting the success of the force did not lie in the style of policing so much as the relationship between senior management and the workforce. Addressing the then chief constable, who had just returned from suspension

and had announced his intention to retire, he said: "The secret of making a success of the link between management and the workforce is to create a performance culture based on good communication and mutual trust."

Mr Savage accepts that the underlying objectives of the failed reorganisation were admirable. He believes that the main reason for its calamitous failure was that, in the haste to change everything, the plan left out crucial aspects essential to success. It failed to guarantee that there would be sufficient

levels of supervision, and a decent system of crime detection and roads policing cover.

“These were not optional extras,” says Mr Savage. “They were the key to giving us the very thing the Home Office prizes above local policing – performance.” He points out that from the beginning the Federation warned the chief constable that the existing systems could not cope. The Federation proposed that the force should adopt the concept of “Train, Equip and Support”, arguing that no officers should be given tasks unless they were trained, equipped and supported to carry them. This, said the Federation, would allow the force to concentrate on achievable goals, rather than putting out press releases that made inflated and unachievable promises of future performance. It was a message that fell on deaf ears at the time.

The retirement of the previous chief constable, coupled with the clear evidence of the failure of the drastic reorganisation, provided an opportunity for a fresh start, which has been grasped by the new chief constable, Tim Hollis.

The somewhat oppressive management style of the past has been replaced by far more openness. It is clear that Mr Hollis, a vastly experienced practical policeman fully understands the scale of the problems that his officers are facing. He is a hands-on leader who has “been there and done that”, and goes out of his way to know the men and women, police and staff alike, who do the donkey work. He fights their corner when they

are unfairly criticised, and has had a lot to do with the remarkable recovery in morale over recent months.

There has been a marked upward trend in the force’s performance, although the eagerly awaited point at which the Policing Standards Unit will disengage, is still some way off. Whilst the Federation is fully supportive of the new regime, there are residual problems that need to be resolved. For instance, much of the improvement in performance was due to increased pressure on operational officers, especially with regard to shift systems.

However, Mr Savage was able to give a guarded welcome to the introduction of more officer-friendly shift patterns when he addressed last year’s annual meeting.

Meanwhile, the force is still confronted by deep-seated structural problems. There are simply not enough officers to cope with the sheer volume of calls on their services. Until this is remedied, the backlog in dealing with volume crime remains an insurmountable problem. During an admittedly brief visit to Humberside, I was able to appreciate the dedication and enthusiasm of these hard pressed officers who are doing their level best to keep pace with the challenge of violent crime and the ever present menace of drug trafficking. As with all police forces, the more successful these officers are in detecting crime and arresting offenders, the greater the volume of work and bureaucracy they have to face.

The officers I met are thoroughly professional and anxious to

demonstrate that, given the tools, they can cope as well as any other force.

There is also a realisation that something must be done, and quickly, to ensure that the policing of Humberside is able to meet public expectations. Despite all the bad publicity of recent times, my impression is that there is a much closer rapport between the police and the public here, than exists in some other areas. The local media is sympathetic and public consultation is high on the police authority’s agenda. The Humberside Policing Plan for 2006/7 stresses the key objectives; incident handling, volume crime, anti social behaviour and neighbourhood policing. The current statistics of force performance justify the chief constable’s assertion that Humberside is one of the most improved forces in the country.

With no early prospect of the creation of the huge regional force, close attention has to be paid to possible alternatives. There is talk of Humberside and Lincolnshire pooling resources to deal with similar problems. This might offer some prospect of success, but the force needs more than sticking plasters.

With West and South Yorkshire now determined to remain independent, it might be expedient to arrange a marriage between Humberside and North Yorkshire, reuniting North Lincolnshire with the rest of that county. Together with a long overdue expansion in police numbers, this might turn the tide once and for all.