

View from the chair

With the revelation that police officer numbers could fall by 28,000 in the next 10 years, Police Federation chairman, Paul McKeever, argue that you cannot put a price on public safety.



Paul McKeever, chairman of the Police Federation

A leaked ten-year plan under discussion last month by the National Policing Improvement Agency touted an astounding proposal to cut police officer numbers by 28,000.

The strategy document states the cuts would supposedly save £400 million, although this figure fails to take account of other staff costs to plug the gap left behind. Whilst the government was quick to deny any agenda, instead saying forces are free to make their own decisions, there was no real assurance that cuts of this magnitude will not happen. The worry is that some chief officers believe they could make such a substantial saving by replacing one in five officers with civilian staff. The paper claimed that this policing solution would be 'at least as good' as having the current numbers of fully trained police officers. I'm not sure on what basis they reach that conclusion but the public deserve more. Are there no boundaries in this climate where cost cutting is king?

Apparently, the intention of the paper was to encourage debate about how police could operate more efficiently with budgetary restraint at the fore. I'm all for encouraging debate, in fact it is essential if we are to move forward as a service, but we cannot expose the public we serve to increased levels of crime and anti-social behaviour. And we cannot threaten police resilience by lowering the ability of the service to respond to the many differing needs of our communities.

As if news of officer cuts was not enough, on the same day

it was reported in the *Independent* that 2,000 new Met Police recruits will not be offered a start date until at least 2011, which will be an incredible two years after their initial interviews and exams.

To top it all, on the same day again, police overtime came under the cosh. Further to the government's policing white paper, the Home Office published their research, *Understanding Overtime in the Police Service*, last month, upon which they outlined their plans to cut police overtime by £70m a year. A Home Office media briefing initiated accusations that the minimum rate for taking a telephone call whilst off duty is the equivalent to four hours pay, disingenuous accusations which do nothing to instil public confidence. Whilst there may be occasions when better planning can reduce the overall overtime budget, it remains the lifeblood of the service providing resilience and flexibility.

How low can officer morale go in one day? I appreciate that in tough economic times there is a need for belts to tighten and for careful consideration to be given on how resources and budgets are allocated. But, equally important is ensuring that no squeeze on public funds is ever detrimental to the ability of forces to provide a consistent and effective frontline response.

The public deserves to have confidence in the police and this can only be achieved by a visible and effective commitment to tackling crime and its causes. Value for the taxpayer is in the quality of service they receive and no cost cutting measures should ever impinge on this.

Officer cuts, recruitment freezes and plans to cease overtime will result in a service in severe jeopardy, with all hope of retaining public confidence lost. The value of public confidence cannot be underestimated, as the government well know. Indeed, that is the single target measure with which the Home Office now judge us.

Yet the government continues to add more pressure on chief officers to make continual cuts in a bid to narrow the deficit. Whilst we are directly paying the price for their errors of judgement, it is the public who indirectly suffer. This relentless number crunching is causing insurmountable damage. You cannot put a cost on public safety, trust and overall officer morale.

We continue to give more for less in these tough economic times but the government must ensure they do not strip us of the core attributes and values which spurred us to join the job in the first place.