

A New Beat:

Options for more accountable policing

by Rick Muir and Guy Lodge

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Executive summary

All public organisations need to be held to account for the ways in which they carry out their duties on our behalf. Robust accountability mechanisms ensure that organisations perform to a high standard and are responsive to the needs of the public they serve.

This report argues that the police service in England and Wales suffers from an accountability deficit. At the national level fragmented governance means that no actor in the system has the power to effectively incentivise performance improvement or drive through change and reform. Recent attempts by the Government to increase control from the centre through target setting and top-down initiatives have had limited success and have made policing even less responsive to local needs and circumstances. At the local level there is no real democratic accountability: police authorities are weak, unaccountable and remote, while elected local government has no effective say over local policing priorities.

This report sets out the consequences of this local accountability deficit for police performance and identifies six options for reform.

Our argument comes in four parts.

1. The genie is out of the bottle

Police reform is now a major priority for all of the main political parties. The Government is due to publish a green paper on police reform this summer and has announced that it will look at options for increasing local accountability. The Government has now conceded two important principles: that there is an accountability deficit at the local level and that people should have more democratic control over policing priorities in their area. The democratic genie has been let out of the bottle in the police reform debate and it will be difficult for any party to put it back in again.

2. The problem

Despite significant increases in funding, police performance on key indicators has not improved. There is also clear evidence that the public believe that the police have become unresponsive to local needs and circumstances. There are a number of factors that account for these problems but one cause of both is the accountability deficit that exists within policing.

Police forces are insufficiently accountable to national policymakers because of fragmented governance. Efforts to increase force accountability to the Home Office through central targets have not raised performance in key areas and have skewed local policing priorities. An even greater accountability deficit exists at the local level where police authorities are weak and remote from the public, and where there is no effective role for local government in setting local policing strategy. As a result there are insufficient pressures to drive change through the system and police forces are insufficiently responsive to local needs.

3. Options for reform

We identify two important ways of improving responsiveness and raising performance.

1. Citizen focused policing

There are measures that can be taken to make the style of policing more responsive and citizen-focused. These include the development of a customer care culture in the police

service, a reduction in time spent on unnecessary processes and paperwork, embedding neighbourhood policing and providing residents with clear information about local crime patterns.

2. Increased local accountability

While it is no magic bullet, making decision-making more accountable to communities is crucial to delivering improved performance and more responsive policing. We identify six main options for increasing local accountability. It should be noted that each of these options will only be meaningful if they come with some powers to:

- set local policing priorities
- allocate financial resources for policing
- have a role in the appointment of senior police officers.

These six options are:

Force-level accountability

Option 1. A directly elected police commissioner. This provides a clear and direct means of holding chief constables to account, which should help drive through change and performance improvement. However, holding the police to account at the force level would still leave decision-making at a level remote from local circumstances.

Option 2. A directly elected police authority. This model prevents power from becoming concentrated in the hands of one person but suffers from less visibility and remains remote from local needs.

Sub-force level accountability

Option 3. Give local authorities control of community policing. This model would see councils perform the roles currently carried out by police authorities. Council leaders would set budgets and priorities and appoint local police commanders. This would improve democratic accountability, deliver local responsiveness and enable policing and community safety to be effectively joined-up. But it is a radical step that would require major organisational change and have significant implications for national police structures.

Option 4. Give local authorities greater influence over community policing. Councils would approve local policing strategies and retain the police precept element of the council tax enabling them to purchase services from the local police. Councils could also be consulted on the appointment of police commanders. This would deliver greater local responsiveness and joined-up services but may risk creating confused lines of accountability between the force and Basic Command Unit. This option could be combined with reforming the role, and improving the effectiveness, of police authorities.

Option 5. The mayoral model. Government could combine police reform with a move to roll out directly elected mayors across England. Mayors could be given similar powers to those identified in Options 3 and 4, but would provide a much clearer and more accountable local voice to set police priorities.

Option 6. A local police board. This would build on existing crime and disorder reduction partnerships but bring about greater public involvement through direct elections.

However, it would separate policing from local government and would be toothless without its own resources.

4. Strategy for reform

These different options each have their own merits and bring their own challenges. There is no perfect system of police accountability. Two considerations inform our strategy for delivering change. First, the evidence base on the relationship between the different reform options and performance is thin, principally because they have not been tested in the real world. Ministers are therefore wary of major reform when such change feels like a leap in the dark. Second, there are significant regional variations which mean that a one size fits all model is inappropriate. For these reasons we recommend that the Government should first pilot bespoke models of police accountability in different areas.

1. The genie is out of the bottle

Police accountability is back on the political agenda. In its Draft Legislative Programme the Government has pledged to bring forward a new Police Reform Bill that, among other things, will create 'a clear and powerful public voice in [police] decision-making through directly elected representatives' (Office of the Leader of the House of Commons 2008: 19).

This represents a significant change in Government policy towards police governance. Until now the Labour Government has opposed plans to allow directly elected representatives to oversee local policing, arguing that they risk 'politicising' police work and could lead to policing being influenced by crude populist calculations.

With this new pledge the Government has conceded two important points:

- That there is a local accountability deficit in policing
- That local people should have much more direct democratic control over the policy and priorities of the police service in their area.

The Government's pledge could be interpreted in a number of different ways and we do not yet know what proposals will emerge in the forthcoming policing Green Paper. However, by favouring direct election, the Government has let the democratic genie out of the bottle and it will be very hard for politicians of any party to put it back in again.

This concern with the accountability of the police service has emerged from a growing concern that policing in Britain has become far too remote from the needs and priorities of local communities. British politicians have long looked enviously across the Atlantic at the ability of powerful local mayors, like New York's Rudy Giuliani, to respond effectively to public concern about crime and bring about impressive reductions in crime rates through innovative action at the local level.

One of David Cameron's earliest initiatives as Conservative leader was to set up a taskforce on police reform, headed by the Conservative MP Nick Herbert. Among other things, the taskforce report called for the introduction of directly elected police commissioners to oversee the strategy of local police forces and more effectively hold chief constables to account.

The Government itself has become increasingly concerned with the question of police reform. In 2007, the former Home Secretary, John Reid, commissioned Her Majesty's Chief Inspector of Constabulary, Sir Ronnie Flanagan, to conduct an independent review of policing. One of the aims of the review was to explore how local accountability could be enhanced. Flanagan reported earlier this year and, without favouring any particular option, set out a number of possible reforms, ranging from establishing police commissioners at force level through to options designed to give a greater role to local authorities.

This paper is intended to contribute to the debate leading up to the publication of the Government's green paper. While the Government has made it clear it intends to consult on the proposals, it appears that some form of direct election at the police force level is its favoured option. We argue that while there are benefits to be gained from direct election at the force level, alternative and additional options must be considered too.

Most importantly the role of local government in holding the police to account should be revisited.

We welcome the Government's decision to publish an early draft of the Queen's Speech. We hope it will now stick with the spirit of this process and give serious consideration to all of the different options available for improving police accountability.

This paper comes in three parts:

1. It argues that there is an accountability deficit in policing, especially at the local level, and shows that this is an important factor undermining police performance and responsiveness.
2. It sets out two ways of improving police performance and responsiveness. First, there are changes at the level of workforce structure and organisational culture to deliver more citizen-focused policing. Second, there are changes to police governance at the local level to deliver greater accountability. The paper identifies six options for increasing local accountability and sets out the potential benefits and drawbacks of each.
3. It briefly sets out a strategy for achieving reform in this area and recommends that the Government first pilots bespoke models of police accountability in different parts of the country, rather than proceeding with a single nation-wide approach.

This paper is the second output from the ippr's wider project on the Future of Policing. The first paper from this project was published in February 2008 and looked at the modernisation of the police workforce (see *The New Bill* by Tom Gash). The final report from the project will be published later this year and will address the wider challenge of how to deliver police reform.

2. The problem

The accountability deficit

All public organisations need to be held to account for the ways in which they carry out their duties on our behalf. Accountability ensures that organisations perform to a high standard and are responsive to the needs of the public they serve. The police service in England and Wales suffers from an accountability deficit. At the national level fragmented governance means that no actor in the system has the power to effectively incentivise performance improvement or drive through change and reform. Recent attempts by the Government to increase control from the centre through target setting and top-down initiatives have had limited success and have made policing even less responsive to local needs and circumstances. At the local level there is no real democratic accountability: police authorities are weak, unaccountable and remote, while elected local government has no effective say over local policing priorities.

In this section we argue that:

- the police service faces two important challenges: the challenge of improving its performance in reducing crime and the challenge of becoming more responsive to the ordinary citizen
- there are a number of factors behind poor performance and a lack of responsiveness, including issues around workforce modernisation and organisational culture, but the local accountability deficit in policing plays an important role in both and therefore needs to be addressed.

The performance challenge

At first glance, it might be reasonable to ask why police reform is required at all. Overall crime, as measured by the British Crime Survey, has fallen by 42 per cent since 1997 and fear of crime has fallen significantly over the same period (Gash 2008).

However, most of the recent fall in crime cannot be attributed to changes in policing. Most criminologists and the Government's own Strategy Unit believe that the bulk of the fall in so-called volume crimes (burglary, theft and non-serious violent crime) has been due to Britain's buoyant economy in recent years, rather than the impact of police work (Solomon *et al*/2007, Pearce 2007). That is not to suggest that the police do not have an impact on crime levels, but to point out that we need to go beyond headline crime figures to assess police performance.

So, how well are the police performing? It is difficult to find holistic measures of police performance, simply because of the diverse range of functions the police are expected to perform. However, key crime reduction indicators appear to indicate that performance has either remained flat or decreased in recent years.

Detection rates, for example, fell between 1998 and 2002 and are only recently approaching 1998 levels, with around 24 per cent of recorded crimes being cleared up in 2007 compared to 29 per cent in 1998/99 (Walker *et al*/2006). Performance on this indicator is also patchy across the country, with detection rates varying to a high degree between different police forces. For instance, detection rates for violence against the person vary from just 26 per cent in one police force to 59 per cent in another (*ibid*).

Detections per officer are the same today as they were in 2001/02, but each police detection in 2007 cost the public purse more in real terms than it did in 2000 (Walker *et*

a/2007). One explanation for this rise in detection costs may be that much of the increased investment in recent years has gone into reassurance policing (the neighbourhood policing programme), which some within the police service argue has more impact on the fear of crime than it does on catching criminals.

While there has been an increase in the number of offences brought to justice ('OBTJ'), this has not been due to more crimes being 'cleared up' and more offenders being brought before the courts. Rather, it has been a consequence of the introduction of new forms of discretionary punishment, such as Penalty Notices for Disorder and on the spot fines (Solomon *et al/2007*, Gash 2008).

In comparative terms, officer performance looks poor: whereas police officers in the USA make an average of 21 arrests per year, police officers in England and Wales make just nine (Loveday and McClory 2007).

So, despite headline falls in crime levels, key measures of police performance have not improved over the last decade. This is despite record increases in public spending on the police and police officer numbers standing at an all time high: spending on the police has increased by 21 per cent in real terms since 1997 and most of this money has been spent on more police officers (up 11 per cent or by 14,000 officers between 1997 and 2007) (Solomon *et al/2007*). If the police are to reduce crime further in the years ahead they will have to do so in a climate of much tighter public spending and make better use of the same pot of resources. They will, in short, have to do things differently.

The responsiveness challenge

Opinion surveys show that public satisfaction with the police service has fallen since the 1980s, linked to a perception that the police have become less responsive to the views and priorities of local communities. We should note that these figures precede the recent roll out of the new neighbourhood policing teams, who are tasked with, among other things, raising public confidence.

The proportion of people expressing confidence in the police, although still relatively high, fell from over 90 per cent in 1982 to 75 per cent in 2001/02 (Rogers 2004). The proportion saying that the police do a 'good or excellent job' fell from 64 per cent in 1996 to just 48 per cent in 2004/05 (Allen *et al/2006*).

Satisfaction with the police is also negatively related to personal experience. In 2004/05, those people who had contact with their local police within the previous year rated them more negatively than those who had not had contact (51 per cent of those who had no contact rated them to be good or excellent, compared to just 45 per cent of those with recent contact). This is not simply because offenders rate the police negatively. People who have been victims of crime in the last year rate the police lower than those who have not been a victim of crime in the last year (41 per cent of victims rated them good or excellent compared to 52 per cent of non-victims) (Herbert 2007). These findings contrast with those from other public services: for example, direct users of schools and hospitals tend to rate those services higher than the public as a whole.

More prolonged contact with the police leads to more negative attitudes: according to one 2005 survey, while 89 per cent of people say they are satisfied with initial contact, only 58 per cent say they are satisfied with follow up contact (Herbert 2007).

Declining satisfaction with the police is related to a perceived decline in traditional community policing and the loss of ‘bobbies on the beat’. When asked what the police should do more of, 59 per cent say more foot patrols, followed by 36 per cent saying community policing. Only 26 per cent say they want more patrols by car and just 19 per cent say more crime detection (FitzGerald *et al*/2002). A 2007 ICM poll found that 73 per cent of the public felt that the police do not spend enough time out on the beat (Herbert 2007). Related to this is a fall in sustained contact with individual officers. The same survey found that 73 per cent of the public did not know any of the police officers in their local area and a further 13 per cent did not know many (*ibid*).

Raising performance and increasing responsiveness

We have set out two significant challenges for the police service: the challenge of raising police performance in reducing crime and the challenge of being responsive to the needs of the citizen. In what follows we argue that, while it is by no means a ‘magic bullet’, reducing the local accountability deficit is critical to tackling both of these challenges.

Performance and accountability

There are a number of ways to enhance police performance and these are the subject of ippr’s wider report on police reform, to be published later in the year. These measures include:

- modernising the police workforce
- improving information systems and processes
- reforming organisational structures to enhance capacity at different levels
- changing organisational culture.

However, in addition to these measures, raising performance will require significant changes in the way the police service is governed, and the ways in which the police are held to account. This is because effective forms of accountability can drive up performance by creating the necessary pressures to improve. Under current arrangements, however, the police are not effectively held to account at either the local or national level.

England and Wales currently have 43 police forces, each headed by a chief constable. The senior management of each police force is made up of a chief constable and a chief officer team and is responsible for:

- setting the force budget
- drawing up and implementing the local policing plan
- monitoring and ensuring compliance with national performance targets.

Under what is known as the ‘tripartite system’ of police governance, which was introduced with the 1964 Police Act, a chief constable is accountable both to local police authorities and the Home Secretary. However, neither of these lines of accountability functions effectively. We look at both in turn.

National accountability and performance

On the face of it the power of the Home Secretary to hold the police to account has increased significantly in recent years. Indeed many commentators have expressed concern about the degree to which the Home Office has become directly involved in the delivery of policing at the local level (Flanagan 2008). However, while there is no doubt

that the power of the centre has grown in recent years, it is far from clear that this has delivered the most effective form of accountability.

The Home Secretary has the power to 'call on' a police authority to suspend or retire a chief constable if he or she believes the chief constable is not performing duties to the required standard, but this power has rarely been used. It was used twice by the former Home Secretary, David Blunkett, in the cases of Paul Whitehouse of Sussex Police and David Westwood of Humberside Police, but only following high-profile investigations into specific crimes that uncovered serious policing failures. Moreover, the Home Secretary still has to get the agreement of the police authority to act. In the Westwood case, Humberside Police Authority initially resisted the Home Secretary's call for it to suspend the Chief Constable, so the matter ended up in court (the judge ultimately sided with Blunkett). It is, perhaps, for this reason that the Government is rumoured to be exploring giving the Home Secretary the power to directly discharge chief constables (*The Times*, 25 May 2008). Reflecting on the tripartite relationship, Blunkett quipped: 'the Chief Constable gets all the power, the Police Authority gets all the money and the Home Secretary gets all the blame' (BBC News Online, 2 July 2004).

In the absence of such 'hard' levers, central Government, and particularly the Labour Government since 1997, has sought to exercise greater national control through a performance management system based on government targets. While there is no doubt that the use of targets has improved police performance in some areas, and that police forces have become more accountable to Whitehall as a result of their introduction, it is nevertheless increasingly clear that this system provides a crude and increasingly ineffective way of managing police performance:

- Centrally imposed performance targets are inflexible to changing demands and needs at a local level. In a recent survey, 71 per cent of Basic Command Unit (BCU) commanders said that national reporting requirements were having a negative impact on the quality of policing in their area (Loveday and McClory 2007). National targets that change in response to political priorities in Whitehall leave police on the ground unable to remain focused on priorities set at the local level. A high 41 per cent of BCU commanders disagreed with the statement that 'staff feel able to challenge the way things are done', showing how inflexible the current system is felt to be (ibid: 19). One BCU commander told ippr how the biggest recent public concern in his area was the number of young children driving mopeds in a reckless and anti-social manner. Despite this, he faced counter-veiling pressure from force headquarters to focus on those crimes for which there were national performance targets. This is the familiar phenomenon of 'only what gets measured gets done'.
- Assessing police performance by a very narrowly defined set of crime reduction outputs has created perverse incentives on the ground. For example, while the Government has met its target to increase the number of offences brought to justice, this has been achieved largely by increasing the number of people that have been cautioned for relatively minor offences and because the police have made use of new summary powers to punish people on the spot, again for relatively minor matters (Solomon *et al*/2007). Rather than focusing on the most harmful crimes, the police have targeted youths for petty offences simply to meet their performance targets, effectively picking 'the low hanging fruit' instead of tackling the crimes that really matter to people.

None of this means that national accountability in itself is undesirable – on the contrary, in some areas it is crucial. For instance, there will always be the need for some central government targets to ensure that minimum floor standards are met. Beyond targets there is a clear role for much greater national coordination when it comes to tackling serious and organised crime and counter-terrorism. Another example would be in the area of developing standard information systems and processes across the police service. Currently forces tend to have their own databases and develop their own technological solutions, a problem that leads to poor information sharing and duplication of resources. Workforce modernisation is also an area that would benefit from being driven nationally.

In these important areas developing nation-wide solutions requires national leadership and, therefore, greater national political accountability. Where the Government has gone wrong is in seeking to hold police forces to account nationally for local community policing matters, which from the point of view of responsiveness are better designed and held accountable at the local level.

Local accountability and performance

If national accountability is confused and ineffective, local accountability is almost non-existent. Police authorities, made up of local councillors, magistrates and other appointed figures, lack real power over police chiefs. While they have the power to appoint and discharge a chief constable, they can only do so with the approval of the Home Secretary. In reality, very few chief constables have ever been discharged by their police authorities for unsatisfactory performance.

Police authorities also have very little impact on policing priorities in their area. Under the ill-defined doctrine of ‘operational independence’ (crafted precisely to keep the police free from political control) police authorities mainly leave strategic policing decisions and the development of local plans and budgets to their chief constables.

Police authorities provide for a very weak link between the police and local communities. They are not directly elected, so their ability to increase part of the local council tax through the policing precept raises serious legitimacy questions. Moreover, the indirectly elected members of police authorities are often not leading members of the local authorities that appoint them and they cover geographically dispersed areas, which means they are remote from the views of local residents (Loveday and McClory 2007). As far as the public is concerned they are barely visible. According to focus groups carried out for the Home Office in 2003, hardly any participating members of the public had heard of police authorities or were aware of the role they played in theoretically holding the police to account (Docking 2003).

So, we have an accountability deficit at both the national and local levels, making it difficult to drive change and incentivise performance improvement through the system. At the local level, accountability is weak because police authorities are remote and lack legitimacy. At the national level, the Home Office has sought to increase accountability through a performance management system that has impeded effective policing.

Worryingly, there is a vicious cycle at play. In the absence of any effective local accountability it is Home Office ministers who are held responsible for the quality of policing at both the national and local level. Knowing they will be blamed when things go wrong, ministers are encouraged to try to enhance police performance using levers like target-setting, which as we have seen have limited, and even perverse, impacts on

policing. But by intervening, ministers reinforce the view that they are, indeed, responsible for all aspects of policing, which locks them into a vicious cycle in which they have to try to manage local police performance centrally. Breaking this cycle is crucial to improving policing, and strengthening local accountability is critical to that.

Responsiveness and accountability

There are a number of factors lying behind the widely shared view that the police have become less responsive to the citizen in the way they go about their work.

Changing police roles

There were a number of changes to police roles and functions in the second half of the 20th century, each of which reduced the day-to-day contact between the police and the public:

- There was a reduced emphasis on crime prevention by street patrol ('bobbies on the beat') and a greater emphasis on catching criminals by responding (usually by car) to calls from the public. In 1967, police forces introduced a new system of Unit Beat Policing, which essentially took officers off walking patrols and put them into vehicles. These covered wider areas and meant they could respond more rapidly to urgent incidents as and when they occurred. However, this new 'fire brigade' service meant that the police had much less day-to-day contact with the general public and meant that the reassuring figure of the British bobby on regular foot patrol was lost. We should note that the recent introduction of neighbourhood policing by the Government is meant specifically to restore this kind of 'Dixon of Dock Green' policing.
- There was a greater and necessary emphasis on detective work, which reinforced the shift away from deterrence-orientated foot patrols. A growing number of officers went into Criminal Investigation Departments (CID), alongside a number of other specialist crime detection units, such as serious crime squads and drugs squads (Maguire 2003).
- The primary objective of policing shifted to fighting crime, which reduced the amount of time police dedicated to their broader service function. The switch from foot to motorised patrols was partly responsible for this – constables were no longer familiar figures walking the streets, able to help citizens with general enquiries.

Rising public expectations

The police face the challenge of rising public expectations, as do all public services. Deference to authority has declined and trust in all public institutions, including the police, has fallen. In addition, we are a much more affluent society in which citizens expect high standards as consumers of goods and services, including those provided by the state. In order to meet public expectations, public services cannot stand still: even if the quality of the service supplied by the police had remained the same over the last 40 years, the police would have needed to 'up their game'.

Lack of a customer care culture

Public satisfaction with the police among witnesses and victims is lower than among the general public, indicating that direct contact with the police leads to increasingly negative views of their performance. This is likely to be due to a lack of a customer care culture in the police force, itself rooted in a lack of workforce modernisation (see Gash

2008). The British Crime Survey has found that nearly a fifth of adults could recall being 'really annoyed' with a police officer in the last five years, and 43 per cent of those said this was due to the officer's manner (Docking 2003). Focus groups conducted for the Home Office highlighted many instances of police officers being rude or abrupt or asking what were deemed to be unnecessary questions (ibid).

A more diverse population

Surveys and focus groups continue to show that people from minority ethnic communities believe that the police discriminate against and stereotype people from black and minority ethnic (BME) groups. A number of independent inquiries have raised serious concerns about the treatment of minority communities by the police. The most prominent recent inquiry was the MacPherson Report into the murder of the black teenager Stephen Lawrence, which concluded that the Metropolitan Police Service was institutionally racist. Since then there have been improvements across the country: hate crime has received a much greater priority (racist crime in London has been cut significantly, for example) and there has been a sustained effort to recruit more police officers from BME groups. The police need to continue this work and ensure that they are equally responsive to the concerns of different communities.

The police have become decreasingly accountable to local communities

One final – and significant – reason for this sense that the police have become less responsive to local communities, is the local accountability deficit.

Originally, Britain's police service was highly decentralised: made up of hundreds of small police forces accountable to local authorities through their elected watch committees. However, over the course of the 19th and 20th centuries, national government introduced a number of changes that cut the links between elected local government and the police:

- Policing was not made a statutory duty of local government when county councils were established in 1888
- Forces increasingly received their funding directly from central government
- Chief constables were declared to be accountable to the law rather than local politicians
- In 1964 the new tripartite system of police governance was set up, on grounds of reducing police corruption.

(Williams 2003)

Under the tripartite system, 43 police forces were established (cut from the previous 106), with chief constables being accountable to larger police authorities and the Home Office. After 1964, the power of chief constables to control force finances was increased and, more recently, the establishment of central performance targets has effectively made chief constables more accountable to the Home Office than to their local police authorities (Loveday and McClory 2007). And as we have seen, police authorities, as currently constituted, do not provide an effective link to the public.

Under this system there is no formal structure through which local communities can set the priorities for the local policing that they, to a significant extent, pay for. In the next section we set out some of the ways we might change this.

3. Options for reform

We have argued that the police are currently under-performing on a number of key crime-reduction indicators and that they are insufficiently responsive to local needs and circumstances. There are a number of factors lying behind these challenges, but we have argued that the accountability deficit in policing is an important determinant of both. The relationship between the centre and the police is currently dysfunctional and requires reform. The relationship between local police forces and the communities they serve is also broken and it is time to introduce new ways of holding the police to account locally. It is this latter challenge with which we are concerned here (we will return to the issue of national accountability and leadership in our final report).

In this section we set out a number of options for reform that would put the citizen, once again, at the heart of policing. These options fall under two very general headings:

- Changes to the way policing is done day-to-day that would make the service more responsive to and focused on the concerns of the citizen.
- Changes to decision-making structures that would make the police more accountable to local communities in the setting of strategic priorities.

Citizen-focused policing

There are a number of reforms that could be undertaken to tackle public dissatisfaction with police performance and make policing more citizen-focused that do not require changes to the formal procedures for holding the police to account. We outline these below. However, it is our belief that these reforms, to be truly effective, would need to be accompanied by wider reforms to police governance. We turn to the ways we might do that in the final section of this paper.

Development of customer care, inter-personal and communication skills

Public confidence in the police is driven largely by contact and communication with its offices. So, for example, 93 per cent of witnesses treated in a courteous manner are satisfied with the police, compared to 27 per cent for those who are not treated in such a manner (Flanagan 2008). Improving customer care requires extensive workforce modernisation. Much greater specialisation of roles within the police service is advocated elsewhere by ippr. This would allow constables who enjoy the interface with the public to specialise in outward facing roles. More civilian specialists could also be employed to carry out tasks, such as victim support, and dealing with reports from the public (Gash 2008). Inevitably, promoting a customer care culture throughout the police service will require improved training for constables more generally and the promotion of a wider culture of professional development throughout the police service, so that managers are equipped to promote these kinds of skills among their officers (ibid).

Less time spent on paperwork

Home Office research shows that, on average, officers spend almost as much time in the station as out of it and less than a fifth of their time on the beat. Fourteen per cent of their time is spent on patrol, while 19 per cent is spent on paperwork. Investment in IT systems and new hardware, such as mobile handsets (as recently announced by the Government), plus greater use of civilian staff to carry out administrative tasks and a reduction in some reporting requirements, could free up more time to be spent on the beat. Of course, any reductions in unnecessary paperwork need to be carefully weighed up against the need to record monitoring information: for example, there remain

concerns about the disproportionate use of stop and search against people from minority groups (Flanagan 2008).

Neighbourhood policing

Neighbourhood policing has now been rolled out across England and Wales and its main aim is to put more ‘bobbies on the beat’. It involves visible foot patrols, community engagement and a ‘problem-solving’ approach to crime and disorder, with officers seeking to prevent crimes locally by working in partnership with local people and other agencies. While it is too early to assess the success of this new approach here, it has been found to deliver impressive results in a number of other contexts. In Chicago, a similar community policing approach has resulted in significant increases in public satisfaction, reduced crime rates (faster than the US national average) and reduced fear of crime (Skogan and Steiner 2004). In Britain, ‘reassurance policing’ along these lines was found in a number of pilot areas to lead to reduced fear of crime, higher levels of public satisfaction, higher levels of officer familiarity and reduced perceptions of anti-social behaviour (Tuffin *et al*/2006).

As well as more visible local foot patrols, neighbourhood policing involves new ways of empowering the public to hold the police to account. For example, as part of this new programme, the Government has launched a National Policing Pledge which provides every area with a set of standards they can expect and that can be used to scrutinize their local policing team. Moreover, there has been the launch of Safer Neighbourhood Panels to ensure that local people are consulted on policing priorities and local residents can use the new Community Call for Action to trigger action on issues like anti-social behaviour.

The priority for forces should be to embed neighbourhood policing and, in particular, to prevent competing priorities corroding it over time.

Information

Ensuring that residents have statistical information on crime levels should improve the answerability of local forces for their performance and may help reduce the perception gap between the fear of crime and actual levels of crime (Flanagan 2007, Duffy *et al* 2008). Some forces have used new technology to map out where crime hotspots are, for example, and the new mayor of London Boris Johnson has promised to make such crime maps available to the public.

To conclude this section we note that many of the underlying causes of declining satisfaction with the police (the lack of a customer care culture, the decline of foot patrols and a demand for more community policing) are rooted in workforce and organisational culture questions. We argue, however, that we are unlikely to witness a fundamental shift in responsiveness and performance unless we address the fact that police governance is fragmented and that local accountability is extremely weak.

While lines of accountability are weak and fragmented, stakeholders will not be able to hold chief constables to account for performance. While resource allocation and strategic policing decisions continue to be made at force level, aligned largely to targets set in Whitehall, policing will continue to ignore the specific needs of local neighbourhoods and force-level priorities are likely to take precedence over community policing priorities. It is for these reasons that changes to strategic governance are required and that the local accountability deficit must be tackled.

Increasing local accountability

In this section we explore six different options for enhancing the accountability of the police service at the local level. These can be distinguished between those bringing greater accountability at the force level, and those which enhance accountability at the level of the basic command unit, the main operating unit for the delivery of community policing. The important issue of neighbourhood accountability has been briefly explored above (we shall say more about this in our final report).

In this paper we do not argue in favour of one single option for increasing the accountability of the police to local people but rather set out the benefits and challenges that come with each. We should note that whether any of these models can genuinely hold the police to account depends on the degree to which they have the power to do three things:

- Set police priorities
- Control all or part of the police budget
- Appoint and appraise chief police officers or local police commanders.

If the Government is to introduce new elected bodies to hold the police to account then it must ensure that they are given the necessary powers, for instance over resources and priority-setting, to carry out this function. If the centre deprives them of these powers then local accountability will be no further advanced.

We should note that some commentators are concerned that increasing local accountability risks ‘politicising’ policing (see Flanagan 2008). Inevitably, giving a greater role to elected representatives means that policing priorities would be subject to the pressures of political contestation. However, the real dangers of politicisation would come if elected figures were taking day-to-day policing decisions, which may well open policing up to corruption and partisan bias. On the contrary under all of the options below the doctrine of ‘operational independence’ is left intact: the directly or indirectly elected representatives set the policy framework, which is then applied on a day-to-day operational basis by the chief constable. This is no more political than the current system under which national priorities are set by the Home Office, also headed by elected politicians.

Force level accountability

Option 1. A directly elected police commissioner

One relatively simple way of introducing greater accountability of the police to local communities would be to elect a person or body to oversee their work. This has the benefits of simplicity: it would create a single line of accountability from the chief constable who makes the strategic decisions for the force to a person or body elected by local people.

The Conservative Party’s Police Reform Taskforce concluded that the best way of doing this would be to abolish police authorities and introduce a directly-elected police commissioner for every force. The commissioner would:

- Appoint the chief constable
- Set policing priorities
- Approve the force budget.

There are a number of advantages to this model. The combination of a clear electoral mandate with effective powers to hold the chief constable to account could significantly help transform police performance. Moreover, giving these powers to a single visible leader would ensure the public know who is responsible for policing and hold them to account accordingly. This might also help to persuade central government to let go of its currently highly prescriptive performance management framework. This is because ministers need to be assured that once they let go, the buck will stop with the commissioner – and not get passed back to them in Whitehall.

There are already signs that the introduction of an elected mayor in London, for example, even without full responsibilities for setting police priorities, has meant that responsibility for dealing with issues such as rising knife and gun crime is at least seen as shared between the mayor, the Metropolitan Police Commissioner and the Home Office.

There are some drawbacks to the commissioner model, although they are not insurmountable. First, we know that police authorities as they stand are barely visible to the public. Democratizing an existing tier of governance of which most of the population are unaware risks generating very low levels of interest and participation.

Second, the problem with introducing greater accountability at the force level, which covers large and diverse areas, is that this level is too distant from the distinctive needs of local neighbourhoods. We know that people tend to be most concerned about crime in their own street or local town centre: voting for a force commissioner would not enable local people to have a say on how their immediate local community is policed. In other words this option might struggle to deliver a more locally responsive form of policing.

Third, there are concerns about the narrowness of the role's focus. Having a single crime-focused position does risk separating policing out from other related services, in particular the community safety work carried out by local government – but also the wider workings of the criminal justice system. This runs against the grain of joined-up service delivery, which most senior police officers and policymakers believe is essential to reducing crime (Loveday and McClory 2007).

Having an election solely focused on crime also poses the risk of encouraging populist campaigns, leading to an arms race in hardline law and order initiatives, cut off from any more considered process of deliberation as to their effectiveness. By contrast, more holistic elections (for mayors and councillors, for example) might help take some of the 'heat' out of law and order debate. This is a strong argument for enhancing the role of local government in policing, which we discuss in detail below.

Fourth, there are concerns that this model would put too much power in the hands of one person. A way of mitigating this would be to ensure that an elected police commissioner were subject to a strong degree of democratic scrutiny. One might therefore decide to retain a police authority to scrutinise the commissioner's decisions.

If we did this, however, we would have to enhance the legitimacy and quality of police authority membership. To do this the Government could require that the members on the authority should be the leaders or the community safety portfolio holders from the different local authorities within the force area. This would ensure that the commissioner were scrutinised by senior and powerful local political figures. This deals

with a common criticism of police authorities as they currently stand, which is that many of their elected members do not carry the political weight nor do they have the right skills to hold the police effectively to account.

Option 2. A directly elected police authority

One way of ensuring that power is not concentrated in the hands of a single individual would be to hold direct elections for the whole police authority. Direct election would enhance the democratic accountability of police authorities and provide impetus for improving police performance. It might also provide for a less remote form of accountability if each of the members were elected for a geographical area within the force's boundaries. If this happened, local people would have a geographically rooted representative who would better understand specific local needs than a commissioner for the entire force.

However, a fully elected police authority brings with it its own problems. This model provides for much less accountability than the police commissioner model because the authority's members would inevitably be less visible to the public. Indeed electing the whole police authority may simply serve to confuse the public over who is in charge. Moreover, whereas an election for a single post might attract local attention and generate political interest, holding a new set of elections for a democratic body at a remote level would very likely result in considerable apathy and a low turnout.

An elected police authority with representatives for different areas within the force might also lead to a situation of clashing mandates, for example between the police authority representative and a local council leader for the same area. This risks complicating lines of accountability for police commanders on the ground.

Sub-force level accountability

One criticism of introducing greater accountability at the force level is that this remains too remote from residents' very local concerns around crime and disorder. In addition to looking at force-level governance, then, it is vital that accountability is also addressed at a more local level. This would generally be the level of the basic command unit (BCU).

Option 3. Give local authorities control of community policing

There are two main advantages of giving first tier (district or unitary) local authorities control of community policing functions:

- As the main established democratic body at the local level they can provide the benefits of legitimacy and accountability without the need for additional elections.
- Because so much local authority work is crucial to preventing and reducing crime and disorder, giving councils a greater role opens up the scope for more joined-up interventions on the ground.

Under this model operational control for delivering community policing (to deal with so-called 'level 1' issues such as burglary, theft, violence and anti-social behaviour) would pass to the BCU commander. Police authorities would be abolished and funding for level 1 functions would go to the local authority. The local authority would be given the legal power to set the policing priorities for their local commander, just as now police authorities have the power to approve or otherwise the chief constable's strategic plan. The local council leader could be given the power to appoint the local police commander.

This is a radical plan that would genuinely deliver much more locally tailored and accountable policing of the kind we lack at present. However, it would require the organisational transformation of policing. Forces could continue to exist under this model but they would be limited to providing ‘protective services’ to deal with serious crimes and cross-border issues, as well as providing backroom and administrative support for local community policing units (human resources functions, for example). In fact it is likely that a shift to this more localised model would put the existence of the current 43 force structure in serious doubt. Stripped of their community policing functions the rationale for 43 forces is extremely weak and the arguments for moving to larger regional forces or even a national serious crime force such as the American FBI would look irresistible (see Herbert 2007 and O’Connor 2005).

We should also note that empowering local government will not on its own resolve the accountability problem, especially given low turnouts in many local elections. For this reason, work at this level should be buttressed by neighbourhood level engagement as well.

Option 4. Give local authorities greater influence over community policing

A less radical option would be to increase the accountability of local police commanders to local authorities. As a first step local authorities could be given the legal power to agree local policing priorities with the chief constable, through the local police commander for their area. This would take the form of a local policing plan that both sides would have to approve, ensuring that there was balance struck between level 1 community policing needs and other priorities.

To underpin these powers with resources, the local authority could retain the police precept: the part of the council tax it currently collects and passes to the police authority. Although the proportion of the police budget made up by the precept varies around the country, this would mean that the local authority would have the power to commission some community safety services from the police (or even, if they so chose, another provider). Because the authority could choose to spend some of the precept funding on other initiatives (more crime prevention work, for instance) it would introduce an element of contestability, with the police having to prove they were providing value for money.

If the current force/BCU structure is to be retained it would not make sense to give local council leaders sole control over the appointment of local BCU commanders since this would break the chain of command between the chief constable and the BCU. Instead other options would need to be considered. At a minimum the chief constable should consult the council leader (as some already do) on the appointment of the local commander. The council could also play a role in appraising the commander’s performance. Other more radical measures might include some role for the leader or other senior members of the local authority in appointing the commander, such as by holding a subsequent confirmation hearing. The local authority might also be given the power to express a vote of no confidence in the local commander, with a requirement on the chief constable to appoint a replacement.

There are, however, some challenges to be overcome to make this enhanced local government option viable. First of all, introducing greater accountability at this level makes the most sense if there is greater managerial and resource delegation down to the BCU from force HQ.

There is also the challenge of creating multiple lines of accountability. Whereas under the current system it is clear who BCU commanders are accountable to (chief constables), under this system they would be accountable to both the chief constable and the local authority. However, while an ultimate line of accountability is necessary (essentially who hires and fires), BCU commanders already have to deal with multiple lines of accountability. They have to work both to force level targets and to their Local Area Agreement targets agreed with the rest of the Local Strategic Partnership and the Government. Indeed in many other areas of public services, not least local government itself, service providers are to some extent accountable to both local and national masters. The most important thing is to ensure that a single policing plan can be agreed for each BCU that incorporates both force level priorities and local priorities as expressed by the local council.

A further consequence of this model is that it would demand a more refined role for the police authority. With the decision to set local policing priorities transferred to local authorities, the police authorities could instead concentrate on influencing force strategy and holding the chief constable to account.

Option 5. The mayoral model¹

Elsewhere ippr has argued that directly elected mayors should be introduced across England (see Kenny and Lodge 2008). By virtue of being directly elected, mayors ensure greater political accountability than is achieved under the ordinary council model. Mayors tend to be well known, enabling them to develop a connection with local voters that indirectly elected council leaders often fail to do. A survey conducted in the London Borough of Newham, for example, revealed that 67 per cent of residents could identify Sir Robin Wales as their mayor. And as the London election campaign proved, mayoral elections can galvanise and reinvigorate political debate in a meaningful way.

Mayors have proved capable leaders, having overseen an improvement in the performance of their councils. The introduction of a mayor in Hackney, for instance, has coincided with a complete turnaround in the London borough's fortunes. Mayors have also pushed through a range of innovative policies such as the congestion charge in London. We have already seen one example of an elected mayor taking a prominent role in policing in the case of London. Although the London mayor does not have the power to hire or fire the Metropolitan Police Commissioner (this remains the responsibility of the Metropolitan Police Authority and the Home Secretary), the mayor sets the police budget. In recent years this enabled the former mayor Ken Livingstone to use his element of the council tax to fund a major roll-out of neighbourhood policing across London, much earlier than in the rest of the country.

So, introducing more directly elected mayors could bring considerable benefits from the perspective of enhancing the accountability and performance of democratic local government. Giving mayors control or greater influence over policing priorities for their local areas, as set out in options 3 and 4, could also bring considerable benefits. As with the case for giving district and unitary local government a greater role in policing, adopting a mayoral model would mean there was no need for additional elections, risking 'voter fatigue', and it would also help ensure joined-up working on community safety.

¹ Here we focus on directly-elected mayors at local authority level. We do not explore the option of city-regional mayors though recognise that they may well be an appropriate reform option for some areas.

However, what the mayoral model would add is a much clearer line of accountability: the mayor would be much more visible than a council leader, would possess a personal mandate that could not be ignored and would likely engage the public to a much greater degree in setting policing priorities by virtue of their higher profile. As with a directly elected commissioner at force level, having a clearly accountable individual at local level who the public know is in charge and that the buck stops with them – and not Whitehall ministers – might also persuade central government to give up seeking to micro-manage policing from the centre.

For these reasons we believe that mayors would encourage the centre to devolve powers and function to the locality in a way that they are currently reluctant to do. Indeed we note that when it comes to policing the Government appears more interested in democratising police authorities than it does in empowering local authorities with a greater say over policing. Had more mayors been in place we believe that the centre would be more willing to consider going down the local government route. We therefore recommend that the Government consider combining police reform with the introduction of directly-elected mayors.

However, we should note that a mayoral model would suffer from some of the shortcomings of the two other local government options discussed above: a radical move to give mayors complete control over community policing would lead to major organisational upheaval, and a less radical devolution of powers might lead to multiple and confused lines of accountability.

Option 6. A local police board

Crime and Disorder Reduction Partnerships (CDRPs) already exist as partnership bodies at borough and district level. They currently have a duty to reflect the views of local residents in setting community safety priorities, although the reality is that they are (like police authorities) barely visible to the public.

It might be possible to increase local community input by having direct elections for part of the CDRP membership. More radically they could be transformed into wholly elected Local Police Boards. Essentially these would be police authorities at a much less remote and more local level.

However, the fact is that CDRPs are currently more invisible to the public than police authorities are. Democratising this tier of governance may generate little interest and the elections are likely to suffer from a low turnout. This is especially likely if the bodies were given few powers: only real power in areas such as appointments, budgets and priority setting would prevent them from becoming talking shops.

However, even if elected policing boards or more democratic CDRPs were given such powers this option would establish a parallel structure to deal with community safety issues, detached from the existing work of local government. From the perspective of joint-working and a problem-focused approach to crime it might be better to opt for one of the local government options set out above.

4. Strategy for reform

Police reform has always been difficult, with countless reports supporting change being left to gather dust over the years (Gash 2008). Proposals for workforce modernisation have typically fallen foul of opposition from the Police Federation, while proposals to change organisational structures (such as force mergers) have typically run into opposition from police chiefs.

But one reason why it is so difficult to advance reform in the area of accountability is simply because the evidence base is very thin. There is some international evidence that we can learn from. Loveday and Reid, for example, point to the ability of a more locally accountable system in the United States to meet growing public concern about crime through new locally initiated policies such as the Compstat data collection and police management system in New York. They contrast this with the highly centralised and much more rigid French police force which has struggled to innovate or to move quickly enough to assuage public anxiety about crime (Loveday and Reid 2003).

However, there is insufficient evidence on how different local accountability models might affect policing performance in a UK context. Ministers are therefore wary of major change when such change feels like a leap in the dark.

It would be better therefore to pilot a number of different options before rolling out a single approach across the whole country. There is also a strong case for bespoke solutions tailored to the needs of different areas. So, for example, a mayoral model might be best suited to a large town or city like Birmingham or Liverpool, whereas an elected force commissioner model might work better in a smaller rural force, such as Warwickshire. With its mayoral system, the London Metropolitan Police Service already has a degree of direct political accountability at the force level that most forces lack and should enhance that model rather than adopt something entirely new.

The Government should therefore pilot the model of accountability that is most appropriate to the particular governance arrangements in individual localities. As part of any deal, they could offer greater local autonomy and fewer central targets. Once those pilots have been evaluated, police forces and local authorities around the country could be asked to choose from a number of options for enhancing local accountability.

5. Conclusion

This report has explored how we might achieve a more locally accountable police service in England and Wales. It comes at an early stage in our research into these questions and its conclusions are therefore tentative.

However, there are some conclusions we can draw at this stage.

- Despite falling crime rates, police performance still needs to improve and the police continue to be insufficiently responsive to local needs and circumstances.
- There are a number of things that need to be done to improve police performance, including workforce modernisation and reforms to operational structures. There are a number of ways of increasing responsiveness, such as by embedding neighbourhood policing and creating a customer care culture in the police service. However, addressing the local accountability deficit in policing is crucial to delivering both better performance and greater responsiveness.
- There are a range of different options for increasing local accountability, which vary in the benefits they bring and the challenges they pose. The Government should give serious consideration to them all. While some, such as direct elections at the force level, bring clear lines of democratic accountability at a more strategic level, they also tend to retain decision-making at a remote distance from local towns and neighbourhoods. Others, such as giving local authorities a much greater role, provide for more local responsiveness, but may introduce more complex lines of accountability. There is no perfect system and there are some clear trade-offs: choices need to be made depending on the objectives that are prioritised.
- Whatever option is chosen, it will be meaningless unless genuine powers are devolved to set policing priorities, control budgets and influence senior appointments. Electing new bodies with none of these powers will take us no further forward and will not be taken seriously by the public.
- We recognise that the evidence base in this area remains thin and that different options may be better suited to different local areas. We recommend that the Government pilot accountability models first and then roll out bespoke solutions in different parts of the country. Whatever particular models local areas adopt, it is clear that tackling the accountability deficit is essential if we are to deliver the kind of responsive and effective policing local communities want.

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