



House of Commons
Home Affairs Committee

Policing in the 21st Century

Seventh Report of Session 2007–08

Volume I

Report, together with formal minutes

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The Home Affairs Committee

The Home Affairs Committee is appointed by the House of Commons to examine the expenditure, administration, and policy of the Home Office and its associated public bodies.

Current membership

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Ms Karen Buck MP (*Labour, Regent's Park and Kensington North*)
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Mr Gary Streeter MP (*Conservative, South West Devon*)
Mr David Winnick MP (*Labour, Walsall North*)

The following Member was also a Member of the Committee during the inquiry:

Mr Jeremy Browne MP (*Liberal Democrat, Taunton*)

Powers

The Committee is one of the departmental select committees, the powers of which are set out in House of Commons Standing Orders, principally in SO No 152. These are available on the Internet via www.parliament.uk.

Publication

The Reports and evidence of the Committee are published by The Stationery Office by Order of the House. All publications of the Committee (including press notices) are on the Internet at www.parliament.uk/homeaffairscom. A list of Reports of the Committee since Session 2005–06 is at the back of this volume.

Committee staff

The current staff of the Committee are Elizabeth Flood (Clerk), Jenny McCullough (Second Clerk), Elisabeth Bates (Committee Specialist), Sarah Harrison (Committee Specialist), Mr Tony Catinella (Senior Committee Assistant), Mr Ameet Chudasama (Committee Assistant), Sheryl Dinsdale (Committee Assistant) and Ms Jessica Bridges-Palmer (Select Committee Media Officer).

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Key facts

- According to the British Crime Survey, crime levels have fallen by 48% since 1995.
- 53% of people thought that the police in their area did an excellent or good job last year; 43% of people thought the police could be relied on to deal with minor crimes; and 48% believed they would be there when needed.
- The average police officer spends around 14% of their time on patrol; the average police community support officer spends 75%.
- It is estimated that officers spend around 20–30% of their time completing paperwork.
- Alcohol-related crime is estimated to cost the economy £7.3bn a year. 45% of victims of violence describe their assailant as being under the influence of alcohol. 70% of police officers believe that attending alcohol-related incidents diverts them away from tackling other kinds of crime.
- Overall police spending was estimated at £12.6 billion in 2007/08.
- The police service spends around £1 billion a year on technology, yet up to 70% of data has to be entered into systems more than once.
- Only 12 out of the 43 English and Welsh forces employ a workforce of over 6,000, considered to be the minimum size for successfully tackling serious and organised crime.
- The police service employs around 145,000 police officers, 77,000 police staff, 16,000 police community support officers and 14,500 special constables.
- There are 6 applicants per vacant officer place and 6% of officers leave the service or transfer to another force each year. However, forces surrounding London have lost 1,038 officers to the Metropolitan Police in the last five years.

Summary

The police service is facing the challenge of a gradual yet significant expansion of its responsibilities. Greater clarity is needed as to its core role in the 21st century. Pressure to meet quantitative Home Office targets has often caused officers to prioritise trivial offences. We welcome the Government's undertaking to replace top-down targets with locally-set priorities, and encourage greater use of officer discretion, backed by more effective supervision.

Public expectations of the police are not being met. The public want the police to be more active in dealing with minor crime and anti-social behaviour. The police should be more visible and more responsive to the public, and should give greater consideration to the needs of the victim in investigating crimes.

A number of functions are putting particular pressure on police resources. Foreign nationals take longer and cost more for police forces to process than British citizens. Rapid immigration has led to funding shortfalls in some force areas. The Government needs to give greater assistance to forces in areas experiencing rapid population change.

We are concerned at the amount of police time spent dealing with alcohol-related crime, with forces now deploying officers for longer periods owing to changes in the licensing laws. We remain unconvinced that Alcohol Disorder Zones will have the desired effect but support the principle of mandatory contributions to policing from alcohol retailers. The practice of loss-leading should be ended and compulsory, enforceable standards for the industry should be introduced.

We are concerned at the large number of murder suspects released on bail. We support amendments to the bail laws to take into account the capacity of police forces to monitor offenders, and a presumption against bail in murder cases. We have seen examples of effective police approaches to reducing gang-related knife and gun crime, which combine diversionary activities with targeted, intelligence-led campaigns against known offenders. However, such approaches can prove very resource intensive.

Faced with tight funding, the police need to identify ways to free up resources. We are disappointed at the lack of progress made in reducing police bureaucracy but welcome plans for shorter crime-recording forms and new processes for stop and account. All frontline officers should have access to a personal digital assistant. Centralisation of the development and purchase of technology through the National Policing Improvement Agency would reduce costs, ensure systems are integrated and prevent duplication.

Regional collaboration works well in some parts of England and Wales, but progress elsewhere is too slow. The Home Secretary should use her powers to mandate collaboration. We support greater use of non-warranted police staff where this is cost-effective, but not to the extent that the number of police officers required for maintaining public order is significantly reduced. We are glad that the Government has abandoned plans to allow police staff to fulfil the role of custody sergeant.

After examining the structures through which policing is organised and governed, we

conclude that the tripartite governance structure should be rebalanced to return more control to local forces. There should be greater accountability of policing at a local level, however, the proposals put forward by the Home Office to restructure police authorities do not meet this need and may undermine partnership working between the police and local authorities. Neighbourhood teams can improve public confidence in the police, but need to gain a higher profile so that their priorities genuinely reflect the concerns of local residents.

There remains a gap in provision for tackling serious and organised crime. We do not support force mergers at this stage as a solution but reiterate our concerns about the lack of progress on collaboration. We found it difficult to assess whether the service has the capacity to respond to a major terrorist attack or manage large-scale events such as the Olympics.

There is no evidence of a drop in the number or quality of police officer applicants, but some forces have expressed concern over retention. In particular, the high number of transfers to the Metropolitan Police causes problems for surrounding areas. The recent lack of candidates for chief officer posts should be addressed through improving incentives, rather than by direct entry to posts from outside the service. There should be greater standardisation in the deployment of police community support officers. The Home Secretary should consider whether they could be granted powers of arrest in exceptional circumstances. We do not advocate affirmative action, but the lack of progress on Government diversity targets necessitates greater efforts to ensure that the police are representative of the communities they serve.

