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This article, 'If you want local policing we've got to remove the handcuffs'
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If you want local policing we've got to remove the handcuffs

We'd all like our policing priorities to be dictated by local need, but senior officers claim that to deliver a fair and equitable service government needs to think again. **Lynda King Taylor reports**

According to the job advertisement, the next Metropolitan Police Commissioner should be able to demonstrate an outstanding track record in countering terrorism, serious, organised and violent crime; in managing change in neighbourhood and other policing functions; and in building the public's confidence in the service at all levels – a key leader of policing nationally.

That advert alone sums up the challenges facing policing at a time when the president of the Police Superintendents' Association (PSA) Ian Johnston says: "Public confidence is fragile and we need to restore it and enhance it by tackling the issues that are a priority to the communities we serve."

Johnston is right. Restoring "dented and bruised" confidence in the police was a major theme of the PSA annual conference. He was not alone in being concerned. Chairman of the Police Federation of England and Wales Paul McKeever says policing "needs clarity, direction and leadership" in the face of "many difficult challenges, restrictions and obstacles".

None of this was lost on Sir Ronnie Flanagan in presenting his review of the police service to the Home Secretary. Months on, there are concerns that the plot is being lost in many of the Flanagan recommendations. Additionally, there is an increasing plea to reduce the politicisation of policing when public perceptions and race relations are under strain – not helped by the resignation of Sir Ian Blair forced by London's mayor. "Proper policing would be impossible," said former Met commissioner Lord John Stevens, "if politicians were allowed to dictate who becomes Britain's most senior officer."

The dangers were obvious to another former commissioner

KEN JONES: "our ability, but not our will, to deliver a fair and equitable service and to get justice for all is constrained"



“Policing policy and practice is now in a state of flux and the service and the public are looking to government for much-needed clarity”

Lord Peter Imbert, who said that "without public trust and confidence the police service is fighting a losing battle". The policing brand has taken a beating. Ken Jones, president of the Association of Chief Police Officers (ACPO), says what is needed is a "responsive, accountable and local police service".

He admits: "Policing policy and practice is now in a state of flux and the service and the public are looking to government for much-needed clarity so that the next chapter in the life of our great service can begin."

In its response to the Home Office green paper on policing, ACPO has reflected unease with recent reforms that are "moving chiefs inexorably toward an employee – employer relationship with their police authorities".

Jones says the introduction of fixed-term appointments, personal development reviews and bonus schemes "unwittingly challenge our strong public service ethos, strategic appreciation and public interest duty".

He and ACPO argue that the current green paper "blurs accountability" and adds:

"Increasingly we are finding that our ability, but not our will, to deliver a fair and

equitable service and to get justice for all is constrained. We ask government to think again."

Paddy Tomkins is Chief Inspector of Constabulary for Scotland. He values community policing but asks the questions on community leaders' lips: "What does community mean in a society where an increasing population do not know the names of their next-door neighbours; where the meeting place of the high street, pub or sporting club has been eclipsed by online conversations; and in a country where single-person households are the fastest growing living unit? The tenet of policing is a service delivered locally – local is where we are, but threats to our local safety can emanate from thousands of miles away."

In responding to the green paper, British Transport Police (BTP) says it may ultimately conclude that neighbourhood policing is "not appropriate or necessary" across its network.

One must ask how the government can demand a substantial increase in public confidence over the next three years – measuring this via the public service agreement indicator from the British Crime Survey (BCS) which asks whether people think police and partners are dealing with crimes that matter locally – when, without a resident population, BTP is not included in the BCS and could not measure public confidence in this way?

In this complex climate, local police steer frontline service delivery knowing they must listen to the demands and expectations of different neighbourhoods while working together with communities.

"Only by creating high-quality engagement and involvement with local people can police more accurately understand what our local priorities are and how the police should be targeting their efforts," says Lord Imbert.

He points to the priority of empowering the frontline in achieving this. Flanagan agrees and recommends the re-evaluation of management and deployment of resources and a reduction in centrally imposed targets to improve efficiency. But no matter how much Sir Ronnie enthuses about engaging "entrepreneurial energies" in policing, fear of crime remains high.

Ken Jones believes that the green paper marks "an understanding that local people need more say in policing and in setting local priorities for tackling crime and disorder". But he adds: "This must be accompanied by a shift from the centre. From ACPO's perspective, without genuine change there will be insufficient space at the local level to deliver the policing pledge."

Jones is not very optimistic about turning Whitehall around in radically reducing targets and bureaucracy so "that local teams can do deals with neighbourhoods which makes sense to them".

All would do well to remember that political imperatives are short-term – communities are around for a lot longer.