

Joining forces? The police mergers debate

John Godfrey offers a view from the coalface.

“Sussex won’t be druv”. It’s an old expression and it was intended to capture the spirit of resistance which was – and perhaps still is – a characteristic of Sussex people. However, much has changed: Sussex plays a key role in the prosperity of the most successful regional economy in Europe, it hosts three universities and London’s second airport and attracts a diverse population, while hanging on to the coast and the glorious countryside for which the county is famous. So Sussex is up for change, but we need to be sure that the change proposed will in fact deliver what’s needed and won’t in the process destroy what we have worked hard to achieve over a number of years.

The current debate is (or should be) about how, as a nation, we cope with the most serious forms of crime and disorder, some of it on a scale which could not have been contemplated even a few years ago. Of course, we must ensure the maximum safety and protection for our people: that is what policing

You don’t maintain consent just by telling people the name of their local police officer: you need to set the governance of policing in the context of an agreed vision for the genuine empowerment of local political institutions, representing the widening circles of community from parish and neighbourhood to county and city. There is no evidence of this vision in the Government’s plans.

Our vision in Sussex is to work more closely with our neighbours within a legally binding framework to provide and fund the required improvements in our capacity to tackle major crime and disorder, while retaining the existing county-based police forces as the delivery mechanism for most policing needs. These forces would continue to be held to account by county based police authorities, which enjoy close political and working relationships (including through Local Area Agreements) with the providers of the other key public services – education, children’s and adults’ services, highways and community safety – on

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is for. But is it inevitably the case that there is only one way to do that, or that the Home Secretary has a unique insight into how it should be done? How does this element of the police reform agenda play with the other key themes of workforce modernisation and neighbourhood policing? How does it relate to the Government’s plans for the future structure and funding of local government? How is change to be managed and paid for? How is policing to be governed in the future?

These and many other questions remain unanswered and we in Sussex are being asked (if that is the right word) to sign up to a fundamental change in the way policing is delivered in Sussex, uninformed by any proper analysis of the alternatives or of the costs and benefits of change, and in the absence of any coherent vision of the way in which the governance of policing is related to the governance of communities. And this is a vital relationship: we are proud of the principle of policing by consent in this country, but consent depends on involvement, scrutiny, challenge, understanding and accountability.

which the success of policing depends. This approach was endorsed by the report of the Home Office and the Prime Minister’s Strategy Unit on Police Reform (which, incidentally, concluded that “Force performance, efficiency and resilience varies but is not related to size”) and was by no means dismissed in the HMIC report *Closing the Gap*. It is the Home Secretary who has so far refused to discuss any option but mergers in his determination to impose a standard ‘solution’ on the whole of the country.

A federal arrangement on the lines we propose, involving all or most authorities and forces in the South-East, could provide the improvements in capacity required, and the savings in support services needed to pay for them. It could provide those benefits at a fraction of the cost of mergers and would leave undisturbed the existing governance arrangements and close relationships with partners, stakeholders and communities, all of which would be that much more difficult to maintain in a merged force with a remote chief constable and a more or less invisible strategic police authority. Equally

if not more importantly, this approach would safeguard the success we have had in Sussex in embedding neighbourhood policing in our communities and would avoid the demands of reorganisation taking resources and management attention away from the task of ensuring that the police are doing their fundamental job properly.

Policing in Sussex has had a chequered history. From a low point five or six years ago, a determined police authority and chief constable have transformed the performance and morale of the force and re-established public confidence. A pattern of county and city based Basic Command Units are in place and policing districts are coterminous with district councils and Crime and Disorder Reduction Partnerships, under the command of chief inspectors with a wide range of devolved powers and resources. We have more Police Community Support Officers in Sussex than in any other county force, the Police Authority's investment in new call handling facilities has resulted in ambitious performance targets being met and exceeded, crime is down, detections are up and we successfully policed the Labour Party Conference in Brighton in 2004 and 2005. Ironically, the Home Secretary's announcement in September last year that mergers were to be enforced coincided with the arrival of a message of thanks from the Prime Minister to Sussex police officers and staff saying that the conference "could not have gone better from the point of view of policing and security". Of course, we must continuously improve and protect services is an area where, given adequate funding, we would liked to have done even more than we have. The current debate potentially provides the opportunity for Sussex to move forward in this area and to develop a flexible and innovative solution that works for us and our neighbours. Sadly, the Home Secretary's focus on a single approach and unwillingness to consider any other suggestions, however well argued, means that the opportunity is likely to be missed. Sussex may indeed be druv, but not necessarily in the right direction.

John Godfrey is Clerk to the Sussex Police Authority.

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Geoff Thompson MBE, Executive Chairman, Youth Charter for Sport, Culture and the Arts
Peter Dunn, Head of Research and Development, Victim Support
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Britain is made up of ethnically and religiously diverse communities. Although the majority of our society celebrate the exciting range of culture and diversity in Britain, racism and race crime are still serious problems throughout the country. Race crime rose by 29% last year and 4,660 defendants were prosecuted for racially aggravated offences in England and Wales in 2004/5.

To effectively tackle race crime it is essential that agencies work together and with individuals and communities to tackle and challenge racism through education, and to build more cohesive communities. It is important that race crimes and the perpetrators of these crimes are dealt with appropriately and effectively throughout the criminal justice and education systems. The government has shown their commitment to this through the DfES Schools White Paper and the Education and Schools Inspection Bill which outlines new guidelines on preventing, tackling, and dealing with racist bullying.

Bringing together representatives from the police, local authorities, community safety teams, the education sector, the youth offending sector and Government, this important national conference will examine how national and local agencies can work in partnership to prevent racism and race crime through effective initiatives. The conference will also consider how strategies can be developed to bring people together to build more cohesive communities.

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