

Workforce modernisation in the police service

Barry Loveday looks at how the reform agenda will affect the police workforce.

One result of current Home Office obsession with police force amalgamation has been that a far more significant and radical reform programme for the future delivery of police services has been left to languish. The workforce modernisation programme aims to challenge old-fashioned and often restrictive practices that currently characterise the police service of England and Wales. As with other public services the modernisation programme seeks to make far greater use of support staff in service delivery while at the same time encouraging the development of greater managerial professionalism and specialisation among police officers.

Yet in the rush to regionalise police forces it is clear that the Home Secretary is now missing a significant opportunity to introduce a far more fundamental reform of the service. Concern about this was to be evidenced most recently at the 2005 APA conference by the Chief Constable of Surrey and ACPO lead on workforce modernisation. Commenting that the police had espoused considerable rhetoric about professionalisation but never delivered the true hallmarks of a professional service, he noted that true reform of the police was about “re-engineering

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working practices rather than, as with force restructuring, merely moving the deck chairs around”.

The drive towards re-engineering the police service was blueprinted earlier by Her Majesty's Inspectorate of Constabulary (HMIC) within its 2004 thematic report *Modernising the Police Service*. At the time of its publication HMIC's thematic received very little publicity. Yet this did less than justice to the nature and extent of reform of the police service proposed within the thematic. In challenging decades of very effective police resistance to change, HMIC were to recommend, *inter alia*, the end of a single entry point into the police service and its replacement by multiple entry points; the creation of common conditions of service for all police staff; the introduction of standard pension rights; a system of professional registration and development programmes and the creation of clear career pathways for all staff with the ability for staff to move between ‘warranted and non-warranted police posts’. Taken together these recommendations would, if implemented, represent the biggest leap made by police forces towards modernisation since their inception in the early nineteenth century.

One of the most significant reforms recommended was an extension of the use of police powers to many more members of the ‘extended police family’. This would embrace roads policing, patrol, escort, detention and investigation and response duties that currently fall to police officers alone. In line with this the Government has initiated within recent and planned legislation the use of police staff to run custody suits and to enable Police

Community Support Officers to exercise limited police powers, operationally, in the exercise of their duties. The expansion of support staff responsibilities has in part reflected the interesting responses received by HMIC from police forces concerning their greater use in the delivery of police services. Of the 41 police forces questioned nearly two-thirds said that in future police staff could be used to carry out stop and search functions; a third stated that staff could be used to make arrests. A majority of forces (60 per cent) also said that police staff could carry out covert policing duties (Herbert and Gower, 2004).

Just a bit of mischief?

The recommendations of HMIC were to be met, perhaps not surprisingly, with deep suspicion within the Police Federation. Indeed an early draft of its findings was helpfully leaked to the press and timed to coincide with the Federation's 2004 Annual Conference in Bournemouth, presumably to ensure that in this arena, at least, the thematic would benefit from the full glare of publicity that its contents were deemed to warrant (Herbert and Gower, 2004). Yet despite Police Federation opposition, the interesting feature of the modernisation programme is the fragmented nature of the response to it among police associations. Unlike the earlier Sheehy Inquiry and Posen Review of the early 1990s, there is no unified opposition to this reform among police associations. Indeed both the Association of Chief Police Officers (ACPO) and more significantly the Police Superintendents Association have welcomed many of HMIC's recommendations.

Evidence of the degree to which ACPO has risen to the challenge presented by the thematic was to be highlighted within a draft report on ACPO's vision for workforce modernisation released in early 2006. Condemning the existing workforce model as obsolete and characterised by inefficiency and restrictive practices, the draft report embraces modernisation of working practices and favours the introduction of mixed teams for the delivery of a range of police services. Mixed teams led by a police constable will consist very largely of police support staff, each of whom can be expected to exercise police powers in relation to a specific function such as investigation or neighbourhood policing. It is argued that an optimal mix of police support officers and constables, linked to ending outdated work practices and employment conditions, could substantially increase police output.

The outdated practices alluded to within ACPO's draft report are also likely to extend to both police pay negotiating arrangements and the current police discipline system. Interestingly both of these are now also subject to fundamental review. It is perhaps for this reason that the Police Federation has recently launched a national campaign driven from the regions against the modernisation programme. The Federation has described the ACPO draft report as a ‘frightening document’ within which direct entry was seen as the most startling element. It wants to ensure that the principle that all police officers ‘start on the shop floor’ is preserved (Martis 2006). Yet the real challenge may be the recommendation by ACPO to introduce common career paths for both non-warranted, partially warranted and fully warranted officers and to also

establish opportunities for common career progression. This element of modernisation is likely to reflect, at least in part, the evident success of community support officers and their future expansion. It is also a belated recognition that police support staff now constitute up to one-third of all police force personnel whose potential skills should be harnessed more effectively by the police service.

Piloting workforce modernisation

Preliminary results of workforce modernisation from the pilot sites are encouraging and are likely to lead much wider utilisation of the modernisation programme. In Surrey 26 constables have been replaced with five 'mixed economy teams' composed of one constable, three investigative assistants and one admin assistant. The constable becomes the line manager for a small team of trained police staff technicians who exercise limited police powers. By increasing police support staff numbers it has been found that a great deal more service delivery hours can be provided to Surrey's residents. Moreover an analysis of crime resolution in the county was to reveal that in only a small percentage of cases were the high level skills of a detective actually needed. Most police crime work involved handling property, taking statements and personal assistant skills.

In response Surrey has now introduced investigative assistants responsible for processing most volume crime in the force area. An initial evaluation of the investigation teams suggests there have been big gains. Average investigation time has fallen from 26 to 15 days while the detection rate has risen by 14%. Surrey police report similar positive results with their neighbourhood policing teams. These consist of one constable, three PCSOs and one admin assistant. Already steep rises in public confidence have been recorded in the pilot sites since their introduction (Police Professional 2005a: 11).

Similar results have been recorded at the Bexley pilot site. As in Surrey an evaluation of traditional investigation procedures was to find that the average investigation time per case was 50 days with 60 per cent of the time engaged on any investigation identified as 'non-investigation work' (Police Professional 2005b:20). In Bexley the pilot sites have recorded a dramatic fall in investigation time from 50 to 16 days. Detections as a percentage of crime have also increased significantly. For the first time ever, it is reported, the detection rate is expected to reach close to 30 per cent of recorded crime (Police Professional 2005b:21). In Bexley police staff now make up a third of personnel employed in crime investigation teams and further expansion in the use of police staff is now planned. This expansion is based partly on the interesting discovery that members of the public appear happy to deal with any member of the Metropolitan police service and that they "do not seem overly worried if that person is an actual police officer or not" (Police Professional 2005b: 21).

Regime change?

The implications of the modernisation programme have yet to be fully realised or perhaps appreciated both within and outside the police service. Yet the level of commitment has been perhaps underlined by the secondment of a senior civil servant from the Home Office to the Metropolitan Police Service (MPS) to lead the modernisation programme within that service. MPS intends to show a clear lead in the greater use of police staff within the modernisation process. Elsewhere within Centrex some initial evidence of changing assumptions concerning police training has been evidenced. By mid-2006 it is planned that police officers and police staff will be trained together under the 'Wider Policing Learning and Development Programme'. While shared training is at an early stage it will remain a central element to the future roll-out of modernisation. It also reflects the likely

impact of the major expansion in PCSOs that is expected to peak at around 24,000 officers in 2008 (Haynes 2006).

There are however other significant reforms that are now in the process of formulation. One is reflected in the recent (2005) Taylor Review into Police Disciplinary Arrangements. Here one of the major recommendations upon which the Government can be expected to act is that future police disciplinary arrangements should follow practice laid down by ACAS which it believes will begin to bring modern management practice into the police discipline system.

One further challenge to traditional police shibboleths can be expected to arise ironically from the creation of the Serious and Organised Crime Agency (SOCA) established under the *Police Reform Act 2002*. One unintended consequence of the creation of this agency has been the discovery that it could lead to the effective death of the 'office of constable' as any member of SOCA can be given all the powers of the constable. These powers will in future be exercised by Inland Revenue Customs and Immigration officers serving within that agency "for an indefinite time" (Police Review 2005). These officers will not be constables but SOCA 'employees'. This is a significant development but may help contribute to the overall police modernisation process.

Workforce Modernisation, if implemented, could fundamentally alter the policing landscape in England and Wales. There is however a political dimension that may yet act as a brake on its future roll-out. Modernisation is predicated on expanding support officer numbers by reducing the size of the current police establishment. It has been estimated that if the programme outlined by the Chief Constable of Surrey was to be implemented, the police establishment could be expected to fall from the current 140,000 to just over 90,000 officers nationally. This phenomenon did not, however, appear to overly engage the Home Secretary. This is because the size of police establishment is now a well-established virility test between the political parties. Primary political concern relates to police numbers, not what police officers actually do. For the modernisation programme to take place, difficult political realities may also have to be confronted. Home Office priority is currently accorded to police amalgamation rather than workforce modernisation. It provides an interesting example of how challenging reform may ultimately be undermined by the pressure of party politics.

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