

Arianna Silvestri writes on recent developments in criminal justice.

Review of Policing: Interim Report

Sir Ronnie Flanagan, the Home Secretary's senior advisor on policing and HM Chief Inspector of Constabulary, published the interim report of his review of policing in September.

The review looks at the work of police forces in England and Wales. It focuses on four areas: reducing bureaucracy, neighbourhood policing, improving local accountability and managing resources more effectively. Flanagan's work is informed by an expectation that conditions will remain challenging in the next 10 years: resources will be tight, terrorism, anti-social behaviour, gun and knife crime will continue to be on the agenda, a wide 'reassurance gap' between fear of crime and actual levels will persist.

The interim report focuses on two of the four key areas: reducing bureaucracy and neighbourhood policing. It makes a number of recommendations, including:

- giving the police more freedom from red tape and paperwork and fostering a culture where officers are allowed to exercise wider discretion and professional judgment;
- reviewing recorded crime statistics, particularly with a view to redefining violent crimes (to only include acts that actually cause physical injury or where the threat of injury is such as to frighten a reasonable person);
- reassessing the priority given in the new performance regime to different offences, so that the weight afforded and time spent on dealing with an offence is more proportionate to its seriousness than at present. This applies in particular to the Public Service Agreement target for offences brought to justice;
- rolling out 'virtual courts', with electronic links being created between custody suites and magistrates' courts (aimed at saving time and prisoners' transport costs);
- a heightened emphasis on neighbourhood policing, with a more integrated approach in terms of budgets, training, recruitment and partnership working.

Flanagan has stated that he will next look at ways for the police to maximise resources (including generating income from private sources and crime proceeds) and that he intends to have a very broad public consultation about local accountability in England and Wales.

'The Review of Policing Interim Report' is available at: http://police.homeoffice.gov.uk/news-and-publications/publication/police-reform/The_review_of_policing_intel1.pdf?view=Binary.

Public consultation on tackling drugs

During the summer the government launched a public consultation about tackling drugs. The current strategy, which started in 1998, is due to expire in March next year. The consultation paper, 'Drugs: Our Community, Your Say' states

that the main policy objectives will centre around improving education and intervention measures, providing more public information, treatment and support, as well as reducing supplies, drug-related crime and anti-social behaviour.

The consultation paper invited suggestions on ways to achieve the above aims. Questions respondents were asked included:

- how to tackle street dealing and how to reduce the impact of drugs and related crime on local communities;
- whether drug education for young people should be expanded and how to support families in developing resilience against use;
- how to improve the effectiveness of specialist services and ensure continued care for drug users after treatment;
- how to reduce drug importation and improve detection;
- should cannabis be reclassified to Class B.

The consultation closed on 19 October. The new drug strategy is expected to be implemented in April 2008.

'Drugs: Our Community, Your Say' is available at: <http://www.homeoffice.gov.uk/documents/drugs-our-community-consultation?view=Binary>.

In addition, the Advisory Council on the Misuse of Drugs is to undertake a review of cannabis classification and will make its recommendations to government in early 2008. The Home Office says that the review will take into account 'the fact that there are now far stronger strains of cannabis available'.

Renewed drive to tackle gun and gang crime

The Home Secretary, Jacqui Smith, announced in September that areas in London, Liverpool, Manchester and Birmingham, which have been identified as suffering disproportionately from problems of violent crime, are to be the focus of renewed action to deal with gun crime and serious violence among 'gangs'. According to the Home Office these hotspots account for over half of all firearms offences in England and Wales.

The government plans to focus on both enforcement action and 'community reassurance'. It has announced a raft of measures as part of what has been called the 'Tackling Gangs Action Programme':

- the use of covert operations and surveillance on targeted individuals, coupled with highly visible police presence on the streets, including school routes;
- civil orders to restrict members of gangs;
- greater witness protection (e.g. possible anonymity) and provision of safe houses for victims as well as witnesses, and for those wishing to leave gangs;
- local community forums, mediation services, extra activities and support in schools for young people and their parents;
- the police to work together with the Serious Organised Crime Agency and border agencies in trying to reduce gun imports and internet trading.

The programme is to be run by a national unit comprising representatives from central and local government and from frontline services. £1m has been earmarked to support this work, which will be overseen by a ministerial taskforce on guns and gangs chaired by the Home Secretary. The Home Office has indicated that they envisage this work will help improve their understanding of serious violence among young people and the nature of gun and gang culture.

The Home Office has also announced that a National Ballistics Intelligence Service (NABIS) will be launched in April 2008. NABIS is expected to provide, for the first time, a UK-wide database of all recorded firearms and ballistic material (such as ammunition rounds and cartridge cases) which can be linked to intelligence information gathered by police forces and other enforcement agencies.