editorial

policing

Barry Loveday and **Peter Francis** put this issue in context.

This current issue of CJM coincides with the implementation of police reform in England and Wales that can be expected to significantly alter the current landscape of policing for the future. The decision of the Home Secretary to act unilaterally on a report from Her Majesty's Inspectorate of Constabulary (HMIC) in late 2005 recommending the merger of police forces, will see the number of forces reduced to at least half their current number. There is a commitment on the part of the Home Office to effectively place future policing on a regional basis. The potential impact of this reform programme on local policing is explored in this issue by John Godfrey, clerk to Sussex police authority, whose own county police force now faces a 'shot gun wedding' with that of Surrey Police.

This has been followed by the 'roll-out', in early April 2006, of the new Serious and Organised Crime Agency (Soca) already dubbed the new 'FBI' of UK policing. It is the Government's answer to the perceived threat of international and trans-national crime, and is intended to work alongside other law enforcement agencies both domestically and abroad. With a total annual cost of at least £400 million and a total staff of 4,200, around 65 per cent of its resources are intended to be directed at drug and people trafficking. Given the limited success to date of law enforcement agencies in stemming the international drugs threat, Soca represents a big but also an uncertain investment. There are limitations to the effectiveness of any 'war on drugs', according to the view explained by Howard Parker in this issue. While this may be true of drugs, Ben Bowling and James Ross cogently argue that transnational crime now represents one of the biggest challenges to police forces in England and Wales, but recognise how much of a challenge it will be for Soca to demonstrate its effectiveness when it is so difficult to evidence reductions in serious crime.

Along with all this there will be very big changes to the delivery of internal support services to the police. The National Policing Improvement Agency which will come into being in mid-2007 will effectively rationalise current police support services in replacing the Police Information Technology Organisation (Pito) and the Central Police Training and Development Authority (Centrex), and also act as a 'driver for modernisation' throughout the police service. The rationale and purpose of the NPIA is fully explored by Peter Neyroud, Chief Executive designate of the Agency.

There are further and potentially as significant reforms which reflect the interesting conclusions of an earlier HMIC thematic on police service modernisation in 2004. This report was to argue the case for fundamental reconfiguration of policing involving a dramatic expansion of police staff and creation of warrantable and non-warrantable posts in the police service with the opportunity of interchange of personnel between posts.

Rightly identified as perhaps the most important Inspectorate report for some years, it is noticeable that, as identified by the Police Federation, policing at 'top tier' and 'lowest tier' will effectively no longer be the total or immediate responsibility of police officers. Interestingly, as identified by Loveday in this issue, initial reports from two sites piloting 'workforce modernisation' clearly suggest that this is where real police reform might be expected to have the greatest impact. One of those research sites, that of Surrey Police, has also, coincidentally, acted as the pilot for the longer term assessment of 'public reassurance policing'. The full impact of this programme looks set to be of huge importance to policing across the country and an evaluation of the significance of reassurance policing is provided by Michael Innes.

A burning issue that has long fuelled debates about the police and policing is that of accountability. Developments associated with a reduction of police forces in England and Wales to possibly ten, together with operational issues such as the murder of Jean Charles de Menezes in the aftermath of the July 7th bombings in London last year, have ensured that police accountability and the relationship between the police, the Home Secretary, Parliament and the public remain front page news.

In relation to this the restructuring of basic command units continues to heighten concerns about the nature and effectiveness of 'democratic' policing. Raine and Dunston, for example, point towards a growing 'accountability gap' between communities and the police authority resultant from an 'upward trend across the country in the size of policing sub-areas'. They report on the piloting of non-statutory panels in a number of local areas across England and Wales whose purpose is to exercise the "account function in relation to operational command units in the same way as police authorities are expected to do at the force wide level". At best, these mechanisms offer some potential for more community representation than do traditional accountability mechanisms. At worst they offer a possible 'opening up' of avenues for police accountability otherwise smothered by the concentration of police resources in fewer but larger area commands.

Whether the pilots described by Raine and Dunston will continue in the context of fewer force areas and thus more strategic police authorities is questionable. This becomes even more difficult to envisage when force mergers are taken together with changes announced in the CDA Review 2006 that, as Gordon Hughes demonstrates in his contribution to this issue, will refine the nature and operation of community engagement in the delivery of community safety. That point aside, the emergent research findings carried out by Raine and Dunstan provides an important message. It reacquaints readers with evidence of the essential ingredients for the development of effective working in partnership, not least time for effective partnership building, training and the qualities of particular participants. Certainly their paper highlights the need to establish the public as stakeholders in, and partners to, police and policing. This is surely preferable to the public being merely recipients of a more centralised and regionalised extended police family.

Although of political importance, more immediate

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concern lies in the ability of police accountability to ensure that police officers act appropriately when carrying out their day to day duties and that effective measures are able to ensure that they are called to account when they don't. Holding the police to account retrospectively remains fraught with difficulties, not least because of the historic failure of internal police disciplinary mechanisms to effectively demonstrate to the complainant that something has been done.

This has been compounded by the lack of independence between the recipient of the complaint and the investigator of it when it involved the Police Complaints Authority (PCA). Indeed, ever since the introduction of the PCA as part of PACE 1984, commentators and critics alike have queued up to question the objectives, operation and effectiveness of a body whose purpose was to investigate complaints against the police but which did so without independence from them.

It is well acknowledged that the provision of effective channels for complaints about abuse and dissatisfaction have been lacking for years. This is a point articulated well by Nick Hardwick and Graham Smith in their contributions to this issue. However, the extent to which the recently established Independent Police Complaints Authority (IPCC), (introduced as a consequence of the Police Reform Act 2002), will succeed where the PCA did not remains an open question. Thus, although Nick Hardwick describes the IPCC as "having gained the grudging acceptance of its severest, potential critics", it is important not to forget, as Smith reminds us, that much of what the IPCC represents is symbolic rather than radically different from its predecessor, and its future effectiveness is precariously balanced between the continuing difficulty of securing and satisfying complainant trust while also retaining police confidence.

An important consideration here, as Smith notes, is that the IPCC must be understood as a development from, rather than a transformation of, a previous system, and that as a result, much remains as it was under the old system. Whilst it is more than just a case of 'old wine' in new bottles, the IPCC remains steeply embedded within the traditional principles of the complaints system in England and Wales.

This issue also considers aspects of police organisational culture. Drawing from the recent and important Home Office report on the impact of the Stephen Lawrence Inquiry, Dean Blackbourn assesses the extent to which recent developments, including the fight of the Gay Police Association to overcome the traditional highly homophobic police culture, have proved successful. Finally and perhaps appropriately given the close attention directed to urban crime challenges to contemporary policing, Rob Mawby provides an interesting overview of the nature and extent of rural crime and the police response to it.

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The independence of both the management and individual agents is not guaranteed by any means. Based on the chequered history of 'regional crime squads' – the building blocks of SOCA's forerunner, the National Crime Squad – it is clear that agencies dealing with organised crime groups face the challenges of corruption and political influence. Robust measures protecting SOCA from outside influences would have been desirable. The Agency will have the oversight of a board of 'non executive directors' appointed by the Home Secretary, but it is far from clear what this role will entail in practice. Linked to these concerns about the independence of SOCA are issues related to accountability and complaint handling. Although provision is made in the Act for independent inspection and scrutiny by Her Majesty's Inspectorate of Constabulary and the Independent Police Complaints Commission (IPCC), public confidence in the ability of such organisations to provide an effective check is low, particularly after the debacle surrounding the IPCC's exclusion from the scene of the fatal shooting of Jean Charles de Menezes – on the grounds of operational necessity – in July 2005.

It is going to be quite a challenge for SOCA to demonstrate its effectiveness in its new national and transnational role. It is far from clear how it can be demonstrated that serious crime has been reduced and that its harm has been mitigated. Even more challenging is to demonstrate that local community safety has been enhanced. Our hunch is that, in practice, it will matter little whether or not SOCA can show that it is effectively reducing crime; it will soon be as impossible to imagine a country without a national capacity to police the transnational trade in drugs, the smuggling of people and the laundering of dirty money as it is to imagine a country without a blue uniformed police service prior to the establishment of the 'new police' by Sir Robert Peel in 1829.

The creation of SOCA, taken together with the government's police reform agenda, marks one of the most radical transformations of British policing in 180 years. The strategy being pushed hard from the Home Office – with minimal consultation within the police service and still less with the public at large – creates a national policing structure with radically enhanced capacity to respond to organised crime, terrorism and public disorder. The creation of a *de facto* national police force, controlled centrally from the Home Office with twelve regional Chiefs, will see an end to the 'tripartite' structure of democratic accountability of British policing and radical transformation of the answerability of the police to the public. The 5,000 strong Serious and Organised Crime Agency sitting at the apex of this policing structure will have national scope and a transnational reach. Blurring the boundaries between police, customs, immigration enforcement, secret service and intelligence organisations, its hybrid 'agents' will undertake their new policing role with unprecedented intrusive and coercive powers. This is certainly the antithesis of the Peelian model of uniformed, visible and locally accountable police, but exactly how it will function, how its performance will be assessed and how its transparency, accountability and integrity can be assured remain open questions.

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