POLICY BRIEFING

Policing in austerity: one year on

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Summary

HMIC’s report, Policing in austerity: one year on, assesses how police forces are achieving their budget cuts between now and 2014-15. The main findings are:

- most forces are currently meeting the financial challenge
- the full effects of incremental changes are yet to be seen
- HMIC has concerns about the ability of the Police Service to transform its efficiency and sustain current levels of service in the long-term.

This report is of general interest, and especially to local councillors with a remit for crime prevention and partners with a community safety remit.

Overview

Due to the government’s 20% police grant reduction, police forces must save £2.4 billion by 2014-15. Most forces are on track financially but three forces, including the Metropolitan Police Service, have major funding gaps and lack a full savings plan.

Police forces plan to reduce the overall number of frontline officers and staff by 6% and non-frontline staffing by 33% by 2015. Forces are cutting expenditure through localised cost savings, as well as strategic operational changes for more effective use of people, processes, technology, procurement and capital assets.

Only further efficiency and better collaboration - with the public and private sectors and between forces - can compensate for the scale of workforce reduction. These are the essential conditions for maintaining the current level of service to the public. Her Majesty’s Inspectorate of Constabulary (HMIC) is calling for a real internal transformation to improve the skills and roles of frontline police and staff interacting with the public.

Crime levels reportedly dropped between December 2010 and December 2011. The public has apparently not yet perceived a change in local policing. Once the full effect of budget reductions are felt, HMIC sees a risk of increased crime levels and reduced public satisfaction.
What drives public confidence and police legitimacy is locally based policing that protects and interacts with the public: the frontline. Forces have therefore sought to safeguard the proportion of frontline police - if not the numbers – by shrinking non-frontline staff numbers and redeploying some on the frontline. By 2014-15, the overall number of frontline officers and staff will drop by 6% (8,100), compared to 2010. Non-frontline staff will shrink by a resounding 33% (20,300) during the same period. This is how the proportion of total frontline workforce (officers, police community support officers (PCSOs) and staff) can be said to increase by 7%, as shown in the graph below (Fig. 7). The following graph (Fig. 8) shows the variation in the number of frontline workforce reductions across all forces.

**Figure 7. Workforce profile split by frontline and non-frontline for March 2010 and March 2015**

Note. Data in the above chart excludes the Metropolitan and Cheshire due to missing data.
Shifting response to neighbourhood teams

All forces are reconfiguring their two main frontline functions with these steps:

- response and neighbourhood teams merged into single policing units
- neighbourhood or response unit nearest an incident responding to it
- neighbourhood teams investigating burglary, instead of the Crime Investigation Department (CID).

Access to services

The proposed closing of 14% of all police stations and 22% of police counters is driven by the drive for reduced expenditure. New counters are planned in supermarkets and libraries. HMIC’s survey identified initial public disquiet about these proposals; there was also concern that alternative telephone services would not guarantee adequate response times.

Some forces have developed online reporting services. HMIC advocates further online service deployment. But it also cautions against “leaving particular groups behind” e.g. those without ready internet access. As for the potential of social media to interact with the public, 42% of respondents reported not using social media.
Special Constables and Police Support Volunteers

Volunteer *special constables*, with the same police powers as regular police officers, help forces manage peaks in demand. Forces plan to increase their number by 58% to 24,500 in 2015. In addition, there are now nearly 10,000 Police Support Volunteers (PSVs) who provide additional capability - without replacing staff, according to HMIC.

**Non-visible roles**

Frontline police work includes *non-visible* roles carried out by police officers. These include managing sex offenders, domestic violence and child abuse, and tackling organised crime. Forces are targeting the highest risk groups by increasing the proportion of workforce in these roles. On the other hand, much of *non-frontline* activity remains behind-the-scene specialist work by police officers e.g. 30% of all criminal investigations and 60% of intelligence work.

A third of police officers in the non-frontline roles are in back office posts, which is an expensive waste of resources. These generic posts include HR, finance, fleet, and facilities management, and are increasingly being outsourced to make savings.

**Transforming efficiency and capabilities: how far?**

HMIC clearly stated in last year’s report that forces’ capacity to cut crime and ensure a visible police presence within proposed workforce reductions could only be achieved by compensatory efficiency improvements: *"The challenge for forces isn’t just to balance the books, but to transform the way they deliver policing services"*. And the Service needs to prepare for further cuts under the next spending review.

Following HMIC’s advice, forces are implementing cost reduction phases in terms of quick wins and “transactional” or “housekeeping” changes, as well as strategic operational changes, involving better utilisation of people, processes, technology, procurement and capital assets, and changing people’s expectations. Appendix E provides very useful best practice examples of innovation by forces in these areas.

However, HMIC notes that forces have continued using the same policing delivery model - with fewer people. There has not yet been a fundamental change to service delivery. Given public expectation of a visible, locally based service, there are limits to the extent the current delivery model can change.

A transformational change programme as part of structured cost reduction, coupled with ongoing “*embedded cost management and continuous improvement*” constitutes the final phase to sustainable cost reduction according to the NAO. HMIC sees the “*transformation of skills, capabilities and roles of the workforce, especially those on the frontline interacting with the public*” as essential to sustaining service improvement.
Lost skills and staff morale

Most workforce reductions are occurring in Year 1 (2011-12) and Year 2. But the speed of change has been unexpectedly rapid: by March 2011, there were 36% more workforce reductions than originally proposed submitted. HMIC calls for rigorous planning to anticipate lost skills and replace them in time. It warns that the combination of rapid workforce reduction with austerity-driven measures such as pay and pension measures will have an impact on staff morale as the review goes forward.

Collaboration: obstacles and improvements

HMIC finds that potential savings can be achieved through collaboration with other forces - for example the National Air Police Service, and firearms. Some forces have harnessed collaboration with the public or private sector, with successful examples sketched out in Appendix E. However, while there has been efficiency improvement in procurement expenditure - in ICT, for example - HMIC finds that the collective buying power of the forces has yet to be developed.

Many forces are now sharing services such as HR and finance. However, as a 2012 National Audit Office report found, this is not a “one-size-fits-all” solution. In Efficiency and Reform in Government Corporate Functions through Shared Service Centres, the NAO warns that shared services can actually raise costs if “they add complexity and are overly tailored to local requirements”.

In its conclusion to Adapting to Austerity, HMIC warned last year that especially with the abolition of the National Policing Improvement Agency, forces no longer benefit from advice on contract management; nor do they have all the efficiency and savings options laid before them, enabling to make informed choices about the most effective way to cut costs while maintaining the levels of service. HMIC advised that an alternative source of support for forces and local governance bodies needed to be established.

Forces are also working more closely with Council partners. In Nottingham’s Project Aurora, police officers are working side by side with Council community safety officers in a single integrated enforcement authority. The result is a more effective approach to tackling crime, anti-social behaviour and wider social problems. In Nottingham, the remit of community safety has been expanded to include tackling prostitution, environmental crime as well as food safety, parking, trading standards, and taxi licensing.
Comparing performance

HMIC’s Table in Annex B ranks forces according to key efficiency and effectiveness indicators. Overall, the table provides a positive picture but identifies specific performance gaps and key risks, principally:

- financial risks: absence of full 4-year savings plan, over-reliance on reserves
- failure to increase the proportion of frontline workforce; a large number of police officers in non-frontline roles
- below national average crime reduction and user satisfaction.

HMIC singles out two police forces and the Metropolitan Police Service as causing multiple concerns. MPS still has a gap of £233m and no plan to resolve it.

Risk of increase in signal crime groups

The “public’s experience of seeing police locally” has reportedly not been yet been affected. Between December 2010 and December 2011, total recorded crime fell by 3% although robbery increased by 3% and other stealing by 7%; total crime increased in 11 separate force areas. The next British Crime Survey results expected in July 2012 will help update public perception. The full effect of changes within forces is yet to be seen. However, HMIC is anticipating the risk of crime increases in robbery and burglary, and decline in public satisfaction of policing services.

The incoming police and crime commissioners have as their remit to increase local accountability for policing. They should bridge the gap in some of the forces’ budgets and address the public’s lack of awareness of the implications of budget cuts.

Comment

There was an unexpectedly rapid exit of workforce up to March 2011, and with it the loss of key skills. The impact of this may be compounded by declining police morale as further staff reductions, and changes to pension and pay conditions are implemented.

The Guardian/LSE joint report Reading the Riots, part 2, published in July 2012, finds that many police officers expect more rioting, due to worsening socio-economic conditions. Paul McKeever, chairman of the Police Federation, said “he believed police would struggle to cope with further disorder if budget cuts went ahead”

Potentially, innovative service integration could play a key role in the current context. The single integrated police and Council community safety enforcement authority...
pioneered in Nottingham establishes an interesting model for learning to make the best of available resources on the ground.

For more information about this, or any other LGiU member briefing, please contact Janet Sillett, Briefings Manager, on janet.sillett@lgiu.org.uk