

IMPROVING POLICE ACCOUNTABILITY: THE LGA PROPOSAL

Introduction

The police need to be accountable to the public they serve, and that accountability needs to be strengthened. However, introducing directly elected individuals to oversee the police is not, in the LGA's view, the best way to strengthen police accountability. In fact we believe directly elected individuals will weaken the ability of the police, councils and other public services in the fundamental objective of cutting crime. In particular we are concerned this model will:

- Fragment local partnerships which are vital in reducing crime and anti-social behaviour as competing manifesto commitments pull councils and the police in different directions;
- Make a place-based budgeting approach, which is key in driving out savings and improving services, more difficult;
- Increase the possibility that responsibility is passed between public agencies for failures to reduce crime;
- Divert resources from important, but less visible police activity, such as tackling serious and organised crime and violent extremism; and,
- Use scarce resources on servicing elected officials at the expense of frontline staff.

The LGA believes a more efficient and cost effective way of increasing police accountability would be to reintegrate police accountability structures with local government. This would enhance and strengthen partnerships, provide the public with a greater say in policing and ensures that every penny can be used for frontline policing.

What does strengthening accountability involve?

For an organisation to be truly accountable, accountability needs to be embedded throughout the organisation at all levels, both in structures and culture. The public most want to have a say in what the police do and challenge how they do it at a street and neighbourhood level. But in order to keep our communities safe the police operate at a number of interrelated levels, both in terms of tackling criminality and

geographically - from the very local issues such as dealing with anti-social behaviour through to more serious crimes such as human and drugs trafficking, through to counter terrorism. The police therefore need to be accountable at each level: from the street and neighbourhood level, to ward level, to district and borough level, to city level, through to police force and combined police force levels.

In a number of forces around the country this accountability from the street to the force level and beyond already exists. The challenge is how this good practice can be formalised, fully integrated into place-based local government approaches, and replicated everywhere. It is no longer good enough to rely on local practice and willingness, as mechanisms need to be more visible and transparent to the public so they can press for appropriate action if necessary.

Providing greater local police accountability

Street and ward level accountability

The public's greatest appetite for having a say on what the police do, and challenging how they do it, is at the street and neighbourhood level. People are most interested in the crime and anti-social behaviour issues in the area immediately around their home and in neighbouring streets, and want to know what is being done to tackle it.

Visible and accessible neighbourhood policing teams are already in place to deal specifically with these issues. In many places they are also working in close partnership with councillors and councils to make the communities they serve safer. **Timely and relevant information in person from police officers and PCSOs or councillors, contact with local residents (for example through neighbourhood watch or tenants' associations), along with letters and newsletters** informing people of what is being done about specific issues would ensure a close connection with and challenge from local people.

At a ward level the local partnerships of neighbourhood policing teams (and on occasion the neighbourhood policing inspector for the area) and councillors can also deal with the more persistent or widespread local issues that may affect several streets or neighbourhoods or a village. **Regular beat meetings involving representatives from all relevant public services, in conjunction with up-to-date local crime information**, would enable the public to hold the local agencies tasked with cutting crime to account.

City district accountability

Within the larger cities, more serious local crime issues such as tackling drug dealing and alcohol-related crime, are often dealt with at a district or area committee level. Police involvement at this level is usually led by inspectors through local non-statutory partnerships or operational task groups, which sit underneath the Community Safety Partnership (CSP).

Where there is an area or district committee this already provides a forum for the public either directly or through their councillors to hold the police to account. They are regularly attended by the appropriate police personnel, most usually the local inspector, and discuss local crime issues. The public can - and do - attend and ask questions of the police and council.

District council and small unitary authority CSP accountability

More serious local issues and crime including licensing and youth work are dealt with at an authority level in district councils and small unitary authorities. Activity to prevent and tackle crime is driven by their CSPs. Typically police involvement in these CSPs is provided by inspectors or Basic Command Unit (BCU) or divisional commanders.

Although the public are generally less interested in engaging at this level of decision-making, in order to provide greater checks and balances on the police and greater transparency to the public, we believe district council and smaller unitary authority CSPs should move from being an officer level group to having greater elected representative involvement. This can be achieved by ensuring that the **CSP is chaired by a member of the council's executive, usually the portfolio holder with responsibility for community safety.**

Greater integration of the police with councils at a management level would help improve crime reduction performance, increase their connections with other public services and strengthen accountability. There are already a number of examples of good practice of **integrating police officers into local authority corporate management teams.** But there also needs to be strong working at the political level with the appropriate **police personnel regularly attending the council's cabinet meetings – alongside the council's portfolio holder for community safety** - to answer questions on performance, to look at the force's budget proposals alongside those of the council and to work with councillors to decide how to meet public expectations. Further integration might include giving the council a role in the appointment of the inspector, or BCU or divisional commander.

The public can challenge the police and seek redress through cabinet meetings and crime and disorder overview and scrutiny committees where they are able to attend and ask questions, and through the use of Councillor Calls for Action. This could be further strengthened by the **co-option of voluntary and business sector, faith community, and neighbourhood watch representatives onto the overview and scrutiny committee** to ensure a whole systems approach of examining an issue where many partners play a role.

City, metropolitan district, and large unitary council accountability

In city, metropolitan district and large unitary councils, crime and community safety issues, such as gun and gang crime and prostitution, are also dealt with by CSPs. Typically, police involvement in these CSPs is provided by BCU or divisional commanders or other senior staff officers.

As outlined in relation to district councils we believe that the CSP should be chaired by a member of the council's executive, usually the portfolio holder with responsibility for community safety. We also believe there should be greater integration of police officers into council corporate management teams so that they regularly participate in executive meetings. As with the district level CSPs there could also be a role for the council in the appointment of the BCU or divisional commanders they work with. Again challenge and redress can be provided not only through the executive, but also through the overview and scrutiny committee responsible for crime and disorder matters, which could also be strengthened by co-option from interested groups such as Community Empowerment Networks, local associations and individuals.

Force level accountability

At force level, chief constables and their senior officers are responsible with partners for managing the force, developing strategic plans, and prioritisation of force-wide issues. We believe that partnership working at this level would be best facilitated **by reintegrating police accountability into council structures**. This would:

- provide democratic accountability;
- be cost effective;
- require only minimal legislative changes;
- enhance and strengthen partnership arrangements;
- drive out duplicate spending; and
- deliver efficiency savings.

In 32 police forces we propose the establishment of new **Local Government Policing Executives** to replace police authorities. Upper-tier councils in these 32 forces would appoint two **policing champions** for their authorities. Directly elected mayors could also take on this role. The policing champions would then be their council's representatives on the Local Government Policing Executive.

The Policing Executives' functions would be similar to those currently accorded to police authorities: appointing and dismissing the chief constable and other senior police officers, establishing the priorities for the force, agreeing strategic policing plans and setting the police precept and the police force budget. A continued role for councillors in setting the police precept will preserve a critical link to local authorities and their budgets.

The size of the Policing Executives would depend on the number of principal authorities in the police force area, with equal representation irrespective of size of an upper-tier authority's population. This means the Executives would range from 4-20 members in size. The Executives could also be required to reflect the overall political balance across the authorities involved. The policing champions would be responsible for all policing activity in their areas, ensuring a good connection between local and force-wide issues.

The Local Government Policing Executives would be held to account and scrutinised by a nominated **joint policing overview and scrutiny committee drawn from the upper-tier authorities in the area**. These committees would be open to the public and allow questioning of the policing champions.

The size of the committee would be for the member authorities to agree, with the number of members nominated by each authority reflecting their population sizes. In order to ensure robust and effective scrutiny of the Policing Executives the membership of the committee would also have to reflect the overall political balance across the authorities involved. If necessary, the chair of the joint policing overview and scrutiny committee would be an opposition councillor. The committees, like other local authority committees would be able to strengthen further the scrutiny they provide by co-opting independent members to provide additional skills or local knowledge, and to ensure the interests of groups such as minority and ethnic and faith communities or the business sector were taken into account.

In local authorities, checks and balances on the Policing Executive are provided by overview and scrutiny committees and full council. To replicate this, **joint policing overview and scrutiny committees** would:

- make proposals to the Policing Executive;
- require the chief constable and other police officers to attend joint committee meetings to give evidence;
- approve the Policing Executive's draft budget for the force, with amendments requiring the agreement of at least 60% of the joint committee members voting.
- approve the Policing Executive's appointments of the force's chief officers, including the chief constable, through confirmation hearings.

In nine English forces (Cumbria, Hertfordshire, Gloucestershire, Lincolnshire, Norfolk, Northamptonshire, Suffolk, Surrey and Warwickshire) where there is just one principal authority – the county council – **the two county policing champions would form the Local Government Policing Executive** on their own. This structure would also facilitate even greater integration of police and council activity as the chief constable would be able to sit as part of the council's senior management team.

These two member Local Government Policing Executives would also be held to account by a joint policing overview and scrutiny committee. This would be formed by councillors from the county and districts in the county's area. Membership of the committee would have to reflect the overall political balance across the county and district councils, with the chair drawn from the largest opposition group on the county council.

Cross force accountability

Chief constables regularly liaise and meet with their counterparts in other forces to discuss serious or organised crime and counter-terrorism issues that cross force boundaries, or to seek assistance in relation to major incidents. **This level of activity should also see the police subject to democratic accountability.** This should be achieved in our view by each Local Government Policing Executive nominating two representatives (the nominations seeking to reflect the political balance on the Executive) who would work on an ad hoc basis with the chief constables to address the important issues being raised. They would then be able to report back to their Executives on the issues, with the Executives keeping local residents informed through their engagement with the public.

Improving performance

The new performance framework suggested by the LGA in our offer to the new government of **streamlined inspection structures alongside stringent self-regulation and a sector-led programme of work to develop data collection systems, analytical capacity, and activity through LG Improvement and Development peer reviews at least every three years** will help to drive up police performance while reducing bureaucracy and central targets. Ensuring effective operation of Local Government Policing Executives will be important. Given the experience and competence of community safety portfolio holders, this new role of policing champions will be a welcome and deliverable policy.

Conclusion

This model delivers our shared aim of improving police accountability from the local to the national levels. At the local level, it provides the public with a greater say in policing priorities; at the partnership level, it importantly enhances rather than compromises crime prevention and joint working; at the force level it provides a more dynamic and effective accountability. It is completely consistent with place-based budgeting and would deliver real financial savings, ensuring that every penny can be used for frontline policing.