

Report to Overview & Scrutiny Committee

Date of meeting: 6 July 2006



**Subject: Proposed Merger of Bedfordshire, Essex
and Hertfordshire Police Areas – Consultation**

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Committee Secretary: Simon Hill (ext 4249)

Recommendations/Decisions Required:

- (1) To receive a presentation from Councillor Robert Chambers, Chairman of the Essex Police Authority on proposals for merger of the Essex, Bedfordshire and Hertfordshire Police Areas; and
- (2) To consider, if any, the Council's response to the formal consultation by the Home Office on the proposed merger proposals.

Report:

On 11 April 2006 the Council received formal notification of the Home Offices intention to make an order to amalgamate the Bedfordshire, Essex and Hertfordshire police areas with effect from 1 April 2008.

This proposal is subject to formal consultation until 11 August 2006.

The following documents are attached as background information:

- (1) Notice of Proposed Merger and consultation arrangements letter dated 11 April 2006; and
- (2) Report on the reasons why the Home Secretary proposes merger.

Having considered the presentation and these background documents the Committee has the option of making representations directly to the Home Office.

Background:

The proposals for the amalgamation of many police force areas is the response of the Home Office to a report of Her Majesty's Inspectorate of Constabulary (HMIC) published on 15 September 2006. This review¹, led by Dennis O'Connor CBE, QBM outlined the findings of the HMIC that (in their view):

- The current '43 force structure was no longer fit for purpose' and 'in the interests of the efficiency and effectiveness of policing it should change';
- There is a correlation between force size and ability to provide effective protective

¹ report at: http://inspectorates.homeoffice.gov.uk/hmic/inspect_reports1/thematic-inspections/closinggap05.pdf?view=Binary

services. Forces under 4000 police officers or 6000 staff in total tended to fall some way short of the required standards;

- There were a range of options considered but in HMIC's professional view the best business solution was a reconfigured service based on strategic forces of sufficient size to provide both effective neighbourhood policing and protective services.

The report also highlighted a number of weaknesses in the current structure which included:

- At the time of inspection only 13 of the 43 forces had fully resourced Major Incident Teams;
- Less than 6% of over 1500 organised crime gangs are targeted by police in the course of a year;
- The inspectorate's report said that some forces' ability to deal with terrorist or domestic extremist incidents would be strained within a matter of hours;
- At the time of inspection only 7 out of 43 forces deployed special branch alongside neighbourhood teams to capture community intelligence;
- Some officers have several crisis management roles that conflict – for example an officer leaving a fatal traffic accident to go to a firearms incident because no other trained person was available; a ports officer having to leave to man a surveillance operation;
- Some forces have no independent armed response capacity at some times of the day and rely on the ability of neighbouring forces to deploy outside their normal force area;
- Only two forces, (the two with greatest officer strength), scored well in the HMIC's assessment of their ability to handle major and serious crimes. All other forces fell significantly short of what HMIC believe is required in this area;
- Too many forces fail to supply enough good intelligence to the National Criminal Intelligence Service (NCIS) to help them pursue organised criminals;
- *Closing the Gap* work on the risks facing police forces today found an increased presence of organised criminal networks spreading outside our cities

Views expressed by other Authorities:

Essex Police Authority is taking legal advice about the possibility of bringing a judicial review to challenge the proposals. It is also undertaking a public consultation about the proposals which includes a discussion at the local Police and Community Consultative Group on 24 July 2006. (Venue TBA)

Hertfordshire Police Authority rejected the proposals for a voluntary merger at a meeting of their Police Authority on 31 March 2006. They are likewise currently carrying out a public consultation and will consider the results on 21 July 2006.

Bedfordshire Police Authority rejected the proposals for a voluntary merger at a meeting of their Police Authority on 4 April 2006 stating that there was no natural link to Essex and that to have a police area with two international airports was potentially problematic.

Essex County Council² voted in favour of retaining a county based force in December 2005 and has recently pledged to continue to oppose the proposal.

² See relevant motion of ECC at:
<http://agendas.essexcc.gov.uk/ComadDocuments/Meeting/1007/061205%20Minutes.pdf>