

18 July 2013

Bedfordshire Police has responded well to the financial challenge, but may soon struggle to protect frontline policing further

Bedfordshire Police has made good progress in meeting its financial challenge. It has developed a detailed change programme which allows it to reduce costs while continuing to fight crime, but HM Inspectorate of Constabulary (HMIC) is concerned about the force's ability to maintain its service to the public when faced with further budget reductions.

In a report published today, HMIC has found:

Progress in making savings

- Bedfordshire Police has identified that it needs to save £19.4m over the four years of the spending review (i.e. between March 2011 and March 2015). The force has planned how to save £20.3m by March 2015, which will deliver an expected savings surplus of £0.9m. Given its success in achieving the savings to date, HMIC expects the force to achieve its target.
- This savings requirement is 16% of its overall budget, and is broadly in line with most other forces. However, HMIC considers that Bedfordshire Police faces a more difficult challenge than other forces. This is because it is already a low cost force, it spends less on policing and its officer costs are lower than in other forces. It is a small force with low financial reserves (savings which can help manage spending pressures) and a challenging crime mix, which gives it limited room for manoeuvre.

Workforce changes and protecting the front line

- The force is reducing police officer numbers by limiting recruitment and holding vacancies. As a result, by the end of the spending review period, it is planned there will be 223 (18%) fewer police officers in Bedfordshire Police. This is a greater reduction than in most other forces.
- Bedfordshire Police is protecting frontline posts as it makes these cuts. This is commendable. Between March 2010 and March 2015, the proportion of police officers in frontline crime-fighting roles is planned to increase from 88% to 94%. This compares to an overall increase across England and Wales from 89% to 93%.
- The force has also made some police staff redundant and not replaced others as they have left. As a result, by the end of the spending review period, there will be 113 fewer police staff in the force. The number of police staff will reduce by 13% between March 2010 and March 2015. This is smaller reduction than that planned by most other forces.
- Bedfordshire Police has protected the number of its police community support officers (PCSOs). The force will lose eight PCSOs (7%); which is a smaller reduction than that planned by most other forces.

Impact on the public

- Over the first two years of the spending review recorded crime (excluding fraud) fell by 18% in Bedfordshire. This is a good outcome as it is considerably greater than the 13% reduction recorded across England and Wales as a whole.
- Victim satisfaction, however, remains at 82.1% which is lower than in other forces.

Future challenges

- Plans for delivering further savings for 2015/16 were dependent on widening the collaboration with Cambridgeshire and Hertfordshire Constabularies to include business support functions. Although this will now not proceed as originally planned (through no fault of Bedfordshire's), the force is strongly committed to continuing to work with Cambridgeshire Constabulary to reduce their joint support costs further. At the time of HMIC's inspection the force was making rapid progress to develop a revised savings plan but understandably there is still more work to do.
- Collaboration can help Bedfordshire provide sound business support and operational support services (e.g. criminal justice units). However, the local policing service in Bedfordshire is at risk of being cut further in the future as already PCSOs are the mainstay of the neighbourhood policing teams.
- The force is fast approaching the position where it has exhausted the options it has for reducing its costs. There are very limited opportunities to further reduce expenditure after March 2015 – without resorting to making significant cuts to front line local policing. There is a danger that the service to the public will suffer as a result. HMIC will revisit Bedfordshire in the autumn to assess its progress in developing options to respond to future funding reductions.

HM Inspector of Constabulary for the Eastern Region, Zoë Billingham, said:

“Bedfordshire Police faces a difficult challenge. It has lower than average funding and a complex crime challenge compared to most forces of its size. As a small force it has limited opportunities for economies of scale.

“The force has responded well to the funding challenge. However, by March 2015 there will be just over 1,020 police officers keeping the people of Bedfordshire safe. This is a very ‘thin blue line’.

“Bedfordshire Police has performed well to achieve an above average reduction in crime over the spending review period. Having taken the range of steps HMIC would expect any force to take to become efficient and effective, Bedfordshire may soon struggle to identify where further savings can come from, with little option but to cut front line police officer numbers further.

“HMIC has concerns about the force's ability to maintain its service to the public when faced with further budget reductions in 2015/16.

“HMIC will continue to monitor the force for the remainder of the spending review period.”

The full report for Bedfordshire Police, along with the national thematic review, can be found at www.hmic.gov.uk

Notes to Editors:

1. The thematic report 'Policing in Austerity: Rising to the Challenge' can be found at www.hmic.gov.uk
2. Victim satisfaction for this force has a confidence interval of $\pm 1.2\%$
3. HMIC's July 2012 report 'Policing in austerity: One year on' and July 2011 report 'Adapting to Austerity' along with supporting materials can be found at www.hmic.gov.uk
4. In October 2010, the government announced that the central funding provided to the police service would reduce by 20% in the four years between March 2011 and March 2015.
5. Her Majesty's Inspectorate of Constabulary (HMIC) is an independent inspectorate, inspecting policing in the public interest, and rigorously examines the efficiency and effectiveness of police forces to tackle crime and terrorism, improve criminal justice and raise confidence. HMIC inspects all 43 police forces in England and Wales together with other major policing bodies.
6. For further information, HMIC's press office can be contacted during office hours from 8:30am – 5:30pm Monday – Friday on 0203 513 0600.
7. HMIC's out-of-hours press office line for urgent media enquiries is 07836 217 729.