





Part 1: Overview

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Overview

This year's assessment starts with my initial observations on the quality of the police response to the public health emergency created by COVID-19, and the wider demands the police faced during 2019.

A series of principal points follows. They are all connected to a central theme: the need for reform in policing. This is in terms of the police service's structure and the arrangements for:

- making good use of an additional 20,000 officers;
- funding the service;
- selecting and developing chief officers;
- collaboration and integration between police forces and other public services; and
- designing and using evidence-based, sustainable approaches to solve policing problems.

I explore how considerable reform is needed for the police to meet public expectations consistently.

The police are overcoming major problems and responding to COVID-19

The policing of the public health emergency is one of the biggest challenges the police have faced in recent years. It is highly unusual in its scale, complexity and duration. It comes at a time when the numbers of police officers and staff are among their lowest since 2010, when the number of full-time equivalent police workers peaked at 244,497.¹ Since 2010, there has been a downward trend, although we saw two small consecutive annual increases in police workers in 2018 and 2019. As at the end of March 2019, there were 20,564 fewer police officers and 15,185 fewer police staff than there were at the same point in 2010.² In terms of the total police workforce, this was 17 percent below 2010 levels.



As police numbers fell, the size of the general population grew. The relationship isn't linear, but the more people there are, the more offenders and victims there are likely to be. Between 2010 and 2019, the population of England and Wales grew from 55.7 million to 59.4 million, an increase of 7 percent.³

More recently, police numbers have begun to rise – and they can be expected to rise much further. Later in my report, I will comment on how the Government plans to return police numbers to 2009 levels by March 2023. But the police workforce is facing this unprecedented crisis at its current, not future, capacity.



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Plans were put into action

A significant and abiding strength of the police service is its ability to respond quickly and effectively to civil emergencies, even with limited resources. In recent months, COVID-19 has tested this strength in individual police forces and across the whole police service. To its credit, the service has responded well.

Police forces routinely plan for civil emergencies, usually as part of multi-agency arrangements involving local resilience forums⁴. At the start of 2020, they had to put their plans into action, adapting rapidly to overcome a series of challenges created by COVID-19. Among the first was the repatriation and quarantine of infected people returning from abroad. Merseyside Police, for example, policed Arrowe Park Hospital, which housed many people who needed to be quarantined on their return from China in January 2020.

Police tried to enforce lockdown restrictions sensitively

A major challenge for the police was how to interpret and enforce regulations the Government urgently introduced on 26 March 2020 to slow the transmission of the disease.⁵ Generally, these regulations severely restricted the public's freedom of movement and required many businesses and services to be suspended.

As quickly as the public had to adapt to life under the regulations, the police had to learn how to enforce them.

The third of the 'Peelian principles', all of which were created in 1829, reminds the police:

"to recognise always that to secure and maintain the respect and approval of the public means also the securing of the willing co-operation of the public in the task of securing observance of laws."⁶

As quickly as the public had to adapt to life under the regulations, the police had to learn how to enforce them. And they had to do so while trying to maintain the public's approval and consent, at a time of considerable anxiety and uncertainty.

When encountering people in public places during the lockdown, police officers had to determine whether they had a reasonable excuse for leaving their homes. In this respect, the regulations were open to some interpretation and, on 22 April 2020, they had to be amended. The amendment established that people needed a reasonable excuse not just for leaving their homes but for remaining outside their homes.⁷

In a relatively small number of cases, officers misinterpreted or misapplied the regulations. Separate legislation⁸, designed to deal with people who may be infectious, was more problematic. In May 2020, a Crown Prosecution Service (CPS) review revealed that all 44 cases under the Coronavirus Act 2020 were found to have been incorrectly charged. They had to be withdrawn or returned to court.⁹

Some police leaders voiced concerns about the service's ability to enforce lockdown effectively in the event of strong public resistance.

There were also indications of an inconsistent approach between police forces. Over the first weekend that the regulations were in place, 27–29 March 2020, some forces issued over a hundred fixed penalty notices for breaches of the regulations; others issued none.¹⁰

However, these concerns are balanced by numerous indications of a sensitive, careful approach, for which the police's efforts should be recognised. Working closely together, the National Police Chiefs' Council and the College of Policing rapidly developed and published joint guidance on how to police the lockdown. Officers were guided to use a four-stage approach of: “engage; explain; encourage; and, only if necessary, enforce”. The guidance was crystal clear that enforcement should be a last resort.¹¹

Enforcement was at times firm

In early spring 2020, many will have seen the extensive media coverage of near-deserted streets across England and Wales. And in the early days of the lockdown, the whole police service issued relatively few fixed penalty notices for breaches of the coronavirus regulations. In the cases where offences were tried at court, convictions usually followed.¹²

Later, the police had to take a slightly firmer line, particularly during the sunny Easter weekend (10–13 April 2020) when more people sought to venture out without reasonable excuse. And in the weeks that followed, the number of fixed penalty notices continued to rise. Police issued a total of 9,176 notices during the period 27 March 2020 to 27 April 2020.¹³

During the COVID-19 emergency, the extent to which the police need to resort to their enforcement powers will be defined by the limit of public forbearance. By May 2020, that limit hadn't been reached. However, on 1 June 2020 (as this assessment went to print and as lockdown restrictions were beginning to be eased) the public's willingness to observe the remaining restrictions was increasingly being called into question. Some police leaders voiced concerns about the service's ability to enforce lockdown effectively in the event of strong public resistance.



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Problems with personal protective equipment created risks to health and safety

Of course, the public's attention has rightly focused on the bravery of those working in the National Health Service, who take sustained and exceptional personal risks every day when caring for patients with the virus. Some National Health Service personnel have made the ultimate sacrifice while saving the lives of others. Such high levels of public service motivation – even to the detriment of individual wellbeing – are in the police's DNA too.

During the COVID-19 emergency, one of the challenges facing the police was to make sure personal protective equipment was available to all officers who needed it. Particularly during the early stages of the emergency, it wasn't always available: officers had to work without it, often placing themselves in harm's way. Another challenge was providing officers with reliable and consistent advice on how and when to use this equipment. Some of the advice was confusing and contradictory.¹⁴

Some officers lost their lives to COVID-19. The police's bravery, and the personal sacrifices of many officers, should not go unrecognised.

Demand changed during the COVID-19 emergency

The police have also had to adapt quickly to changes in demand during the emergency. In some welcome respects, demands on the police fell. Chief constables reported reductions in the volume of phone calls (both 999 emergency calls and 101 non-emergency calls), fewer arrests, and less crime, particularly acquisitive crime, such as burglary. Based on provisional figures, reported crime went down by 28 percent in the four weeks to 12 April 2020, compared with the same period last year.¹⁵ There was an increase in the proportion of crime reported online, rather than in person or over the phone.



But in other respects, demand increased. The charity Refuge reported that, during the week commencing 30 March 2020, calls to its domestic abuse helpline increased by an average of 25 percent.¹⁶ The charity also saw a 150 percent increase in the number of online visits to its website¹⁷ during the initial stages of the lockdown. The relevant National Police Chiefs' Council lead officer issued a statement, reaffirming that tackling domestic abuse remained a police priority.¹⁸ Chief constables also reported concerns about increases in child sexual abuse, including online abuse, and other forms of online crime generally, including fraud.

Some criminals even used COVID-19 as an opportunity to defraud people. By mid-April, Google reported that it was blocking 18 million scam emails related to COVID-19 each day. During the first month of lockdown, the National Crime Agency (NCA), working with the National Cyber Security Centre and the City of London Police, took down more than 2,000 illicit websites relating to COVID-19. These included fake online shops, malware distribution sites and phishing sites seeking personal information such as passwords or credit card details.¹⁹

Some forces raised concerns about road safety during the lockdown, with some people speeding while the roads were quieter.

COVID-19 will affect the future of policing and the criminal justice system

There will undoubtedly be many more lessons for the police service, other public services, and local and central government to learn from COVID-19. We are already supporting the National Police Chiefs' Council's work to evaluate emerging crime trends, and we anticipate the scope of our support to expand. When our inspection programme resumes in due course, we will play an even bigger part in helping the police learn the lessons.

The police have had to adapt quickly to changes in demand during the emergency.



Other public services have been affected too. For example, the criminal justice system – already struggling in many respects – will face displaced demands that it will find hard to meet. On 23 March 2020, it was announced that no new jury trial should start in the Crown Court.²⁰ Trials already under way were concluded and, by 24 April 2020, no trials were under way.²¹ As this assessment was being finalised, plans were being made to resume jury trials, but only in a few courts.²² There was already a considerable backlog of cases awaiting Crown Court trial.²³ Unavoidably, the disruption will add to the backlog, and it raises serious questions about the viability of the system; justice delayed is justice denied.

But this is just one aspect of a much bigger problem.

In last year's assessment, I described the criminal justice system as dysfunctional and defective. Since then, there has been little substantial improvement in its condition.

Her Majesty's Courts and Tribunal Service is part way through a programme of reform, but it has made less progress than expected and its ambition has been scaled back.²⁴ In England, the proposed Royal Commission on Criminal Justice, announced in late 2019, is not yet under way. In Wales, there has been more progress: the report of the Commission on Justice in Wales proposes comprehensive reforms.²⁵

COVID-19 is already having a far-reaching and long-lasting effect on public finances.

Arguably, the imperative has never been greater for these (and other) reforms in the interests of efficiency. COVID-19 is already having a far-reaching and long-lasting effect on public finances. It is reasonable to expect that funding for public services will soon be in much shorter supply than envisaged a matter of months ago.

I have devoted the rest of my assessment to the state of policing that prevailed in 2019, before COVID-19 emerged. It includes my observations on the reforms that will be necessary for the police service to gain, and keep, acceptable levels of effectiveness and efficiency in the years to come. To a considerable extent, the police service's success will be defined by the urgency and resolve with which these reforms can be made.

However, before turning to the reforms, I will comment on the other demands the police have had to deal with during 2019. These placed the police service under considerable pressure.²⁶

There are considerable pressures on the police

Following a long-term reduction, levels of crime have stayed broadly stable in recent years. The latest available national statistics (for the year ending December 2019) estimate a 5 percent reduction in overall levels of crime for the year. But it is too early to say whether this is a change in the recent trend.²⁷

This insight, which comes from the Office for National Statistics, is important and helps to put into context any discussion about demands on the police. But, behind the headline statistics, there is a more complex picture.

There remain high levels of mental illness, and drug and alcohol dependency, among those taken into police custody.

Vulnerable and mentally ill people present major demands

Many forces report increases in demand, particularly in responding to the needs of vulnerable people. This is usually because other public services have been withdrawn or scaled back. Generally, incidents involving vulnerable or mentally ill people are complex and time-consuming for the police to deal with.

There remain high levels of mental illness, and drug and alcohol dependency, among those taken into police custody. Many of the problems I reported in *State of Policing 2018*²⁸ are still of concern. In particular, serious weaknesses in the provision of mental health services place more demands on the police.²⁹

For example, Greater Manchester Police told us its officers and staff are dealing with more people with mental illness than ever before. Avon and Somerset Constabulary told us it experienced an 8 percent annual increase in mental health-related calls in 2019. The force also said that, in 2018, 70 percent of the 1,228 people it detained under section 136 of the Mental Health Act 1983 had been detained before.

Dyfed-Powys Police and Hywel Dda Health Board operate a joint mental health triage team. Services of this nature may be effective; arguably, their necessity is heightened because mental health provision alone is inadequate. This raises wider questions about the role of the police. If they are expected to concentrate on crime and disorder, the Government may need to consider specifying to what extent the police should be dealing with mental health-related incidents. Next year, with the other criminal justice inspectorates and the Care Quality Commission, we intend to carry out a joint inspection to assess how offenders with mental ill-health are treated in the criminal justice system.

Other demands on the police are increasing too. South Wales Police told us it had a 65 percent increase in missing person cases over the past year; and Northamptonshire Police forecasts a 43 percent increase by 2022. It isn't a crime to go missing from home but, whenever people are reported missing, the police must establish their whereabouts and whether any crime has been committed. And, as far as they can, the police must protect the person who has gone missing from becoming a victim of crime. Children missing from care homes are at particular risk of criminal exploitation, which can result in them becoming victims, offenders, or both.³⁰ Cambridgeshire Constabulary told us that, in the 12 months to November 2019, it had received 657 missing from home reports for children in care.



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Serious organised crime and terrorism are major threats

The NCA estimates there to be more than 350,000 people involved in serious and organised crime in the UK.³¹ For the police, this presents major challenges. Offences such as organised fraud; money laundering; cybercrime; drug, firearm and human trafficking; and modern slavery are particularly complex to investigate. They often need months – and sometimes years – of painstaking work.

These offences also require high levels of specialist expertise, in dealing with extremely vulnerable people and in areas such as digital forensics, especially when mobile phones and other devices have been encrypted to frustrate law enforcement. Encryption is increasingly available to less-sophisticated offenders. There were nearly half a million reports of suspicious financial activity in 2019, another record number.³² Some investigations involve lines of enquiry into the use of crypto-currencies.

Terrorism remains a major threat. In November 2019, the Joint Terrorism Analysis Centre revised its assessment of the threat to the United Kingdom from terrorism. After a lengthy period at 'severe', the threat level was reduced to 'substantial'.³³ This means that an attack is deemed to be likely, but not highly likely.

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On 29 November 2019, a recently released terrorism prisoner carried out an attack on London Bridge, during which he stabbed five people, two of whom died. On 2 February 2020, another recently released terrorism prisoner carried out a separate attack in which he stabbed two people in Streatham, London. In both cases, police very quickly shot the attacker dead (in the second case, the attacker was under police surveillance at the time). This undoubtedly saved the lives of innocent people. But, even in our cities, providing such rapid police response times creates substantial demands on forces.

Demonstrations and flooding created additional demands

There have also been many public order demands on the police during 2019, often related to Brexit demonstrations and far right-wing activism. The police also had to prepare to deal with any civil unrest in the event of a 'no deal' Brexit.

In summer 2019, Extinction Rebellion caused major disruption in cities, creating extra demands on forces such as the Metropolitan Police, South Wales Police, Avon and Somerset Constabulary and West Yorkshire Police. Elsewhere, Warwickshire Police reported larger and more frequent protests against the new HS2 rail link's construction. And in June 2019, Surrey Police and Sussex Police co-ordinated a road safety and public order operation to deal with a large-scale international Hells Angels gathering. It resulted in 34 arrests.³⁴

An increase in officer numbers on this scale will have a tangible and beneficial effect on the service.

Flooding has been a particular problem for the police this year. In August 2019, when part of a dam collapsed after very heavy rain, it created a complex and demanding incident for Derbyshire Constabulary, with a nearby village having to be evacuated. In February 2020, floods attributable to storms Ciara and Dennis created very substantial demands on several police forces, including West Mercia Police, South Yorkshire Police, South Wales Police and – again – Derbyshire Constabulary.³⁵

The demands on the police are complex, many and varied, and forces regularly struggle to meet them. So a recent Government announcement to increase resources was welcome.

Planned increases in resources need careful handling

In October 2019, the Home Office announced an uplift programme with more funding for the police service. This involved plans to increase police officer numbers by 20,000 over the next three years, including 6,000 by the end of 2020/21.³⁶ In response, forces have begun to increase the size of their recruitment intakes.³⁷

An increase in officer numbers on this scale will have a tangible and beneficial effect on the service. The significance of this should not be underestimated. Put simply, the police service will be able to meet more of the demands it faces. In every sense, these benefits are welcome.

However, in the interest of managing public and political expectations, wider observations need to be made about the programme. There also needs to be a debate about the disadvantages of viewing police effectiveness solely by the number of officers in the service, or by percentage changes in the volume of recorded or detected crime.



Success must be measured more intelligently

In purely numerical terms, the effect of the uplift programme will broadly be to reverse the reductions in police numbers. As the numbers went down, some elements of police demand went up. But, in any case, policing isn't just about the number of officers, and it would be wrong to measure its effectiveness in this way. For example, in schools and colleges, the quality of education isn't best defined by the number of teachers: it's best defined by the results of the process – progress, attainment and exam results.

In policing, the desired 'results of the process' are straightforward to define but more complex to assess. The first Peelian principle – the prevention of crime and disorder – offers a valid starting point. It is certainly legitimate to expect the police to focus on preventing crime and disorder. But specifically what crimes, why, to what extent, and by what means should they be prevented or detected? Put simply, forces have to prioritise.

The risk is that targets based on crudely drawn percentage measures will lead to perverse outcomes. They have repeatedly done so in the past, to an unacceptable extent and with disastrous results.

For example, during the 1990s and early 2000s, in numerous towns and cities across England and Wales, the widespread and systematic physical, sexual and emotional abuse of vulnerable children was, to a considerable extent, ignored or tolerated. At the time, police forces tended to focus on other priorities such as burglary, street robbery, criminal damage, anti-social behaviour and car crime. As a result, in too many respects, child abuse went unchecked. The full extent of police and other public service failings are now being laid bare through the Independent Inquiry into Child Sexual Abuse.³⁸



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Recruitment in very high numbers will be difficult

It will be a major undertaking for forces to recruit and train student officers in such large numbers. Over the past five years, an average of 6 percent of police officers have left the service each year.³⁹ This is usually through normal retirement, with smaller numbers resigning before retirement, leaving through medical retirement or, in a few cases, being dismissed. So forces have to recruit in significant numbers simply to keep the workforce at its present level. There will also be a need to recruit more police staff to support the newly recruited officers.

Taking these factors into account, the police service will need to recruit and train a total of 54,000 people over the three-year period. The police may be given the funding to recruit in such large numbers, but this is no guarantee that it will be possible in practice. The recruitment process will need considerable effort and resources.

The inexperience of new recruits will be a concern

The recruitment process will result in a disproportionately high number of inexperienced student officers in response policing, where new police officers usually start their careers. In some forces, inexperience at the front line is already a concern.⁴⁰ Inexperienced officers may also need to tutor, mentor and supervise student officers. When fully recruited, it will take time for this 20,000-strong cohort to develop the skills and experience it will need to become fully effective. Similarly, it will take time for the uplift programme's effect to be felt on the previously reported national shortage of detectives, which police leaders are working hard to address.⁴¹

On a positive note, the uplift presents a good opportunity for the police leadership to improve diversity in the police workforce. Currently, no more than a third of police officers are women, and fewer than one in ten officers are from an ethnic minority.⁴²

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Police funding arrangements carry limitations

There are other limitations associated with the uplift funding. These include its relatively short-term nature and the wider police funding arrangements, the formula for which continues to attract considerable criticism. There are deep-rooted problems with the funding formula, which the uplift money doesn't address. The Home Office should review the funding formula.

I have said before that short-term funding is problematic for the police. Forces must balance new, longer-term capital investment (for example, in technological capability) with shorter-term funding for frontline services. Leaders must often make difficult choices. This can mean critical or mandatory services having to be prioritised at the expense of other, less urgent ones.

An unwanted effect of short-term funding arrangements is the way they often impede new and longer-term investment. As a result, in some respects, particularly technology, policing is gradually falling further behind some other aspects of society. A good example of this is the Police National Database, to which a few forces' information systems still aren't properly connected. This is despite the police service treating the matter as a critical incident⁴³ during 2019.

Short-term funding also hampers organisational development in other areas, such as force-level violent crime reduction units and regional-level organised crime units. Units of this nature often rely on dedicated annual funding that is made available for specific projects.

Also, a significant percentage of the NCA's funding comes in this way. The NCA's inability to hold financial reserves from year to year makes this funding arrangement particularly problematic.



More sustainable funding arrangements are undoubtedly needed. They could be implemented in the form of, say, rolling three-year programmes, adjusted each year. This would be an enormous aid to strategic planning.

Forces also face uncertainty over the costs of delays in providing the new Emergency Services Network. This £9.3 billion programme is to replace and upgrade the police and other emergency services' mobile communication systems, but it is delayed by three years.⁴⁴ Until December 2022, the police service won't be able to make the expected efficiency gains from the new system. And, in the interim, at least one force reports having to replace worn-out radio hardware with new but outdated hardware, to continue working on the current system. These are major financial and operational risks.

The police service needs the right leadership capability and capacity to modernise and restructure effectively.

Chief officer selection needs an overhaul

In 2019, we inspected the police service's arrangements for selecting and developing chief officers.⁴⁵ The inspection revealed major weaknesses, which, if not properly addressed, will have a profoundly adverse effect on the police service. The police service needs the right leadership capability and capacity to modernise and restructure effectively. The main findings and recommendations from the inspection appear later, in Part 2 of my assessment. The College of Policing has already done a considerable amount of work to address them, but there is more to do.

The service needs to become much better at maximising the potential of its people. The current arrangements are leading to parochialism and a significant drop in applicants for the most senior roles. This raises questions about whether and how future chief constables are being identified and provided with the extensive range of experiences and development they need to become fully equipped for the role.

It also highlights the effect of changes to the role of HMICFRS. Before 2011, Inspectors of Constabulary played an active role in advising police authorities as they recruited new chief officers.⁴⁶ This advisory role required Inspectors to have an in-depth understanding of the merits of each candidate. Inspectors often sat on recruitment panels. They gave a professional view on the quality of evidence each candidate offered, while not taking part in the panel's decision making. Generally, the system worked well. However, it was discontinued when police and crime commissioners were introduced, and it wasn't replaced with anything more suitable. As a result, we, local policing bodies and chief officers all report weaknesses with the current selection and development arrangements.

The 43-force structure needs reform

In some important respects, the current 43-force structure is no longer fit for purpose. It hasn't been for many years, and its shortcomings shouldn't be considered less important than other policing matters. As I have said before, in too many respects, the lines on the map that delineate force boundaries act as barriers to the exchange of intelligence, to co-operation, and to true effectiveness and efficiency.

A 1960s structure can't cope well with modern criminality

The origins of the 43-force structure go back to the 1960s.⁴⁷ So, by decades, they pre-date many things that society now takes for granted in modern life: for example, the internet and mobile phones, mass access to affordable vehicle ownership, and rail and air travel (although these have been interrupted by COVID-19).

These things have in many respects enriched human life, increasing our mobility and making us better connected than ever before. But they have also enabled criminality, the types and scales of which were wholly unimaginable in the 1960s. Online fraud and other forms of cybercrime are now among the greatest crime threats to the public. Rural police forces may face bigger challenges from cross-border drug dealing along 'county lines' than from domestic burglary. Many organised crime groups transport drugs by train, taking advantage of the 'cover' provided by the considerable increases in rail passenger volumes of recent years.

Since the 1960s, in many respects, policing has been modernised at various times, but not to the degree it needs. The establishment of regional organised crime units, and the creation, in October 2013, of the NCA have both helped the police to tackle serious and organised crime, much of which is online and crosses regional, national and international borders. And there are many examples of innovative, creative and determined efforts by dedicated police leaders. But, with its current structure, the service still isn't configured to deal with these crimes – and some other modern forms of criminality – as well as the public has the right to expect.⁴⁸

Online and cross-border crime demand more co-ordination and co-operation

The service's current structure provides a sensible blueprint for tackling 'local' crimes – those where the crime scene, offender, victim and witnesses are all conveniently located in one force area. But the inescapable fact is that an increasing proportion of crime isn't local.



To tackle it more successfully, there needs to be more systematic co-ordination and co-operation between police forces, and between the police and the NCA. This co-ordination and co-operation should be on a greater scale. There is an increasingly pressing need to develop an effective and efficient single system of law enforcement, with clear local, regional and national components. In this respect, the findings of a serious and organised crime review commissioned by the Home Office in October 2019 will be welcome.⁴⁹

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A redesign should lead to further modernisation

Put simply, this should involve going back to first principles, whereby the police service works out what capabilities and capacity it needs to tackle crime effectively and efficiently. It should then reorganise accordingly, defining what should be done locally, regionally and nationally. The process should involve comprehensively mapping out the real patterns of demand and offending. This should be not just on a geographical basis but in public, private and virtual environments too.

To some extent, forces already try to do this, through force- and regional-level strategic threat and risk assessments. And the NCA produces the National Strategic Assessment of serious and organised crime, the current version of which describes “a rapidly evolving threat that is becoming increasingly complex as criminals exploit the fast expansion of technology”.⁵⁰ These processes are valuable and worthwhile, but they tend to be used for decision making within current organisational structures. They don’t guide the service towards redesigning or modifying its structure to the degree it needs.

Until the structure of policing in England and Wales has been substantially modernised in this way, the service’s efficiency will continue to be compromised. And it will remain unable to cope well with the local, regional, national and international patterns of crime we now commonly experience.

I welcome the establishment of the National Policing Board.

In some respects, the police have made progress. For example, most forces have signed up to the ‘single online home’, which is designed to give the public a consistent means of interacting online with police forces. But generally, the police’s information and communications technology (ICT) arrangements are unnecessarily expensive and don’t work together well enough. There is ample room for improvement.

Leaders should seize the options for change

There are various options open to leaders – among both police leaders and elected representatives – to develop better-connected and integrated structures, systems and processes. These improvements would make the service more fit for its 21st-century purpose.

The Home Office should take a stronger leadership role

First, there is an important role for the Home Office to play, particularly in making regional and national functions work more efficiently and effectively – with each other and with local police forces.

I welcome the establishment of the National Policing Board. The Home Secretary chairs this group, which includes other ministers and is attended by the leaders of all the principal policing institutions. It too has an important role to play.

In last year’s assessment, I described how there may need to be compulsory, rather than voluntary, reform. For example, there would be considerable advantage in a national prescription of capabilities and resourcing levels of regional organised crime units. Under the current arrangements, chief constables and local policing bodies must only “have regard” to the Strategic Policing Requirement.⁵¹

When contemplating these sorts of reforms, there is clearly a balance to strike between the central and the local. Both are necessary, if the service is to tackle its structural problems while maintaining local accountability.

Also, as I said earlier, the unequal nature of the police funding formula needs attention. This also needs the Home Office's leadership. Until the formula is improved, we can expect to see more examples of police forces applying for Home Office special grant funding (usually reserved for unexpected and exceptional policing demands), simply to make ends meet.⁵²

The College of Policing should play a more prominent role

Second, there is the College of Policing's role in establishing common procedures and practices. Policing isn't regulated in any way resembling the economic or safety regulatory regimes in other safety-critical essential public services such as nuclear energy, transport, telecommunications and broadcasting. HMICFRS is not a regulator; regulators have powers of intervention, direction and enforcement. Because of the special powers invested in police officers, British policing has never been – and should never be – under that degree of control.

But that doesn't mean forces shouldn't have to adhere to regional and national procedures and practices when they are established fairly and are clearly in the public interest. Establishing these procedures and practices is properly the responsibility of the Home Office with the approval of the College of Policing; better still, their introduction should be prompted by the College, with the Home Office facilitating the process.



To an unacceptable degree, major decisions can be influenced by parochialism.

With some exceptions – such as discipline arrangements and police officer ranks – forces are largely free to operate in the way they consider most suitable for their local demands.⁵³ This arrangement gives police forces considerable freedom, which is generally welcome. But it can come at a cost. For example, differing procedures and practices between forces can cause operating standards and performance to become unacceptably inconsistent. Or procedures can vary so much that forces find it hard to work together when they need to, such as during major incidents and civil emergencies.

Since May 2014, legislation has been in place that requires the Home Secretary, under certain conditions, to make regulations if asked to by the College of Policing. Such regulations would require one or more police forces to “adopt particular procedures or practices; or to adopt procedures or practices of a particular description”.⁵⁴

Arguments in favour of the College making use of this legislation are becoming increasingly strong. For example, this year we recommended its use to improve the way chief constables select candidates for assessment and development into chief officer roles.⁵⁵ When our inspections expose unacceptable weaknesses in policing practice, we may recommend more regulation.

Chief constables and local policing bodies should overcome parochialism

Third, there are the roles of chief constables and local policing bodies, who are responsible for making local decisions on policing. There is an inherent tension between decisions that benefit an individual police force or local community and decisions that benefit other police forces (usually the others in the region) or the police service in general. We often see this tension arise when forces look to enter, or withdraw from, collaboration agreements. We are increasingly seeing the latter, which raises major concerns; I will comment on this later.

Of course, local, regional and national policing interests aren't mutually exclusive. But it can be difficult for chief constables and local policing bodies to reconcile them.



To an unacceptable degree, major decisions can be influenced by parochialism.

More needs to be done to remedy the disadvantages of the current structure, while protecting its advantages. If the 43-force structure is to survive in its current or a somewhat modified form, there will remain a need for far more efficient and effective arrangements – which apply to all Home Office forces and the NCA – for making decisions about things that must be done the same way everywhere. That is not to say that local accountability should be abandoned; it is and will remain very important and must be protected. But it needs to be balanced with much better assurances that forces will act in the regional and national policing interest when there is a case to do so.

Policing and some other public services are closely linked; the level of investment in one service will have an effect – good or bad – on another.

The network code concept, which I have commented on before, is such a case.⁵⁶ A network code is a collective decision-making mechanism for establishing and securing adherence to principles, practices and procedures that need to be common on a regional or national basis, using a system of voting. The United Kingdom has already introduced such mechanisms in several essential public services. The legal technology already exists: it is tried and tested, and it works. Since 2016, I have been calling for chief constables and local policing bodies to pool their sovereignty by signing up to a network code.

Some may be reluctant to do so. One of the obstacles is the very diverse nature of the 43 forces, in terms of the size of the forces and the geographical areas they cover. For example, the demands facing the Metropolitan Police Service are extraordinarily different from those facing Cumbria Constabulary. Replicated 43 times over, this can make collective decision making at best problematic and at worst impossible.

But many aspects of policing are common to all forces. And in respect of many systems and procedures, there are strong arguments in favour of making collective rather than individual decisions, to prompt closer alignment.

Police ICT is a powerful example. Closer alignment and commonality in this and many other aspects of policing would lead to considerable improvements in effectiveness and efficiency. With measures such as weighted voting, minority protections and different voting thresholds for different decisions, a well-conceived network code would successfully guide the service to a better balance between local, regional and national policing interests.

In other words, it would help to overcome parochialism. Police leaders – and, in some cases, leaders of other parts of the criminal justice system too – should adopt a network code.

Policing and other public services need greater integration

My assessment describes the state of policing, not the state of other public services. But, of course, policing doesn't operate in a vacuum. Policing and some other public services are closely linked; the level of investment in one service will have an effect – good or bad – on another. For example, gaps in youth services can mean that young people aren't diverted from crime. They can go on to offend, placing demands on the police and the criminal justice system.⁵⁷

Policing is most closely linked with education; health (particularly mental health), drug and alcohol dependency support; housing; and social services. But it isn't only these services that can pass demand onto the police. For example, Dyfed-Powys Police told us its officers are increasingly administering first aid or transporting casualties to hospital. This is because ambulances aren't always available to attend the scenes of incidents quickly enough.



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There are good examples of the police and fire and rescue services working well together. Generally, demands on the police and health services are going up, whereas demands on fire and rescue services are going down. In South Yorkshire, for example, if people needing urgent medical attention are found in locked buildings, the fire and rescue service now forces entry for the ambulance service. This was previously carried out by the police. Some fire and rescue services are using spare capacity to carry out community safety work, which also benefits the police. Some local policing bodies have taken responsibility for the local fire and rescue service as well as the local police force, but none has integrated them in a comprehensive way.

Poor service integration perpetuates the circularity of offending

There are many good examples of the police and other public services working well together. But, generally, at the local level there needs to be better integration between the police and other services. Without this, there can only be an unco-ordinated response, particularly to the needs of vulnerable people. This can make local services less efficient than they could be.

The police service, the wider criminal justice system and other public services are too fragmented in many respects. This perpetuates the circularity of offending. Many people whose life experience leads them to the fringes of society become offenders. Some become repeat offenders. This happens for many reasons – for example, unstable home and family environments; poverty; ineffective parenting; unsuitable housing; adverse childhood experiences; long-term absence from school; drug and alcohol addiction; mental illness; criminal exploitation; exposure to prison environments; ineffective rehabilitation; and weak or absent support and supervision on release from prison. Whatever the reasons, the shortcomings of one public service will often transfer demand to another.

The police service, the wider criminal justice system and other public services are too fragmented in many respects.

In a joint inspection report⁵⁸, published in February 2020, we and Her Majesty's Inspectorate of Probation found that integrated offender management arrangements have lost their way since 2015. This joint police and probation service approach holds great potential for managing the most prolific offenders, but it badly needs new national leadership to reinvigorate it.

The prison population of England and Wales quadrupled in size between 1900 and 2018, with around half of this increase taking place since 1990.⁵⁹ Although the prison population isn't quite as high as it was around a decade ago, some prisons are still overcrowded.⁶⁰

For policymakers, this raises dilemmas about where to concentrate finite public money and resources. For example, the Government could stop school exclusions, improve mental health provision, spend more on probation services, or build more prisons. To break the cycle of offending, there needs to be a radical rethink, with a new plan to make these interrelated public services function together in a more integrated way.

Some collaboration agreements are particularly mature and evidently successful.

Collaboration agreements need stronger foundations

In 2009 and 2011, legislation was passed to enable and encourage more collaboration between police forces.⁶¹ It gave forces a duty to collaborate “where it is in the interests of the efficiency or effectiveness of their own and other police force areas”.⁶² Then and more recently, police forces were under considerable pressure to reduce their spending (as a result of the financial crisis and the period of austerity that followed). Many forces did so by entering into collaboration agreements with each other.

Now, the scope and complexity of these collaborations vary a great deal. Some collaboration agreements are broad. Others are much narrower, covering one or more specific functions. There are service-wide collaboration agreements, such as the agreement that created the National Police Air Service. There are also agreements between neighbouring forces. These include the agreement between the Surrey and Sussex forces that created their joint major crime investigation team, and the agreement between the Welsh forces that created an all-Wales police recruitment system. Firearms teams, marine and underwater search units, police dog units, mounted branches and motorway policing teams are among the features of policing commonly seen in collaboration agreements.

Some collaboration agreements are particularly mature and evidently successful. Arguably, one of the best examples of this is the East Midlands Police Collaboration Programme. Through this collaboration, the Leicestershire, Derbyshire, Lincolnshire, Nottinghamshire and Northamptonshire forces collaborate on a wide range of operational and administrative functions.

However, even in that example, the chief constables and police and crime commissioners don't always find it easy to reach agreement on how best to develop the arrangements. Taking the full range of collaborations into account, the state of collaboration across the police service raises two causes for concern.

The first is that collaboration arrangements are largely piecemeal and patchy. And, with one exception – counter-terrorism policing – the arrangements don't reflect a well-conceived strategic plan for the police service as a whole.

Successful collaborations need particularly strong leadership.

The second is that collaboration agreements have often proved to be deeply problematic. Some have already been torn up. Examples include a tri-force collaboration between the Avon and Somerset, Gloucestershire and Wiltshire forces, which ended in 2018, and the strategic alliance between Warwickshire Police and West Mercia Police, which broke down in 2019.

Among those that continue, some face considerable difficulties. This can be particularly evident in cases where the forces are significantly different in size, such as the Warwickshire and West Mercia example. In cases involving more than two forces, gaining and keeping consensus about priorities and appropriate levels of resourcing can be especially difficult. The more forces involved, the more will be the chief constables and local policing bodies whose views need to be heard and reconciled.

The police's experience has shown that successful collaborations need particularly strong leadership and a shared conviction among participants that the collaboration should be supported. When chief constables retire or new police and crime commissioners are elected, even the strongest agreements are vulnerable to changes of personality.

Easing financial pressures may make collaboration a less-favoured option

This year, forces have faced less financial pressure. And if the Government continues to prioritise the funding for the 20,000-officer uplift programme, financial pressure on forces will continue to ease. So, arguably, collaboration is now a less-favoured option for the police. In the short term, it would be deeply regrettable if forces treated the 20,000-officer uplift programme as an opportunity to neglect their duty to collaborate.

Forces increasingly recognise the importance of evidence-based practice and are keen to adopt it.

In the longer term, it is too early to predict the exact effect of COVID-19 on public – and therefore police – finances, but it will undoubtedly be considerable. When implemented well, collaboration offers the police a route to greater efficiency. This is likely to become even more important as the country deals with the economic and social costs of COVID-19. The police will almost certainly have to provide evidence of improved efficiency and productivity. And more than ever, as this assessment highlights, the regional, national and international nature of crime means police forces must work more closely together. If they don't improve in this respect, the service's effectiveness will continue to suffer.

This raises a major question about the future of police collaborations. The current arrangements, including the statutory framework and the duty to collaborate, haven't resulted in sufficiently strong, stable, service-wide collaboration agreements. If collaboration is to be an enduring part of the solution to policing's problems, chief constables and local policing bodies will need to be more actively incentivised – and possibly compelled – to enter into collaborations and make them work.

Evidence-based, sustainable approaches are needed to solve policing problems

In another respect, policing is improving. Forces increasingly recognise the importance of evidence-based practice and are keen to adopt it. We are seeing more of a recognition of the important role that data and technology, particularly machine learning, have to play. This is a theme that began to emerge in recent years.

For example, Avon and Somerset Constabulary has established a Data Science and Innovation Centre, through which it develops data-driven services in collaboration with local authorities. West Midlands Police operates a data-driven insights programme. South Yorkshire Police is in the early stages of a project with Sheffield Hallam University. It is developing an artificial intelligence-based algorithm to identify children at heightened risk of exploitation. And, in late 2019, Greater Manchester Police set up an evidence-based practice hub to carry out research into relevant areas, such as current and predicted social norms, which will have an effect on policing.

At a national level, the College of Policing continues to develop its 'What Works Centre for Crime Reduction'. This valuable initiative gives the police accessible, evidence-based examples of effective crime reduction techniques.⁶³

These initiatives are promising, but there is a note of caution. As the service becomes increasingly data-driven in its adoption of predictive policing, it will be important to make sure the police preserve their legitimacy. This needs appropriate measures to guard against bias towards any particular group of people.⁶⁴



The service should follow the trail of data

Also, the service as a whole lacks the infrastructure and consistency of approach necessary to exploit fully the data it holds. This is because many of its information systems are unconnected. There needs to be a more systematic way of analysing all this data, along a trail that begins with the events and circumstances that lead people to commit crime. The trail needs to flow through the initial police response, custody, follow-up investigations, criminal justice processes and longer-term outcomes for individuals and communities. Without being able to analyse data comprehensively and systematically, policing won't be as efficient as it can be.

And without such analysis, there are still some important aspects of policing that aren't as evidence-based as they could be. A good example of this is the policing of knife crime, which is now 49 percent higher than it was when comparable recording began (the year ending March 2011) and the highest on record.⁶⁵

When confronted by an increase in knife crime, some police forces tend to carry out more stop and search.⁶⁶ Undeniably, every time a police officer takes a knife from someone unlawfully carrying it in public, they may well have prevented another stabbing. And it would seem logical to conclude that the increased use of stop and search may deter potential offenders.

However, the causes of knife crime are complex, needing a multi-agency response. The true efficacy of stop and search as a means of reducing knife crime is a matter of some difference among expert bodies. For example, an independent study published in 2019 suggested that stop and search's overall effect on crime (not just knife crime) is likely to be at best marginal.⁶⁷

There may not be a strong evidence base for the efficacy of stop and search, but there is plenty of evidence of disproportionality in how the police use it. In the year ending March 2019, people who identify as black were nearly ten times more likely to be stopped than people who identify as white.⁶⁸ This raises the prospect of an unintended consequence that shouldn't be ignored.

One of the stated aims of the 20,000-officer uplift programme is to improve diversity in policing. But disproportionality in stop and search risks alienating some sections of society, particularly young black men. Many people who are stopped and searched have committed no crime. So efforts to improve diversity may be at risk of being thwarted by a well-intentioned but potentially misguided approach.

Levels of service don't always meet public expectations

Against the most serious criminality, and especially terrorism, policing can be particularly effective. The life-saving interventions of police officers on London Bridge and in Streatham I referred to earlier are cases in point. And police forces increasingly recognise and deal effectively with vulnerable people, such as children and older people.

However, focusing on dealing well with the most serious offences and safeguarding the most vulnerable in society may come at the expense of wider public confidence and satisfaction in policing. The factors I have described in this assessment have a worrying consequence: across the gamut of crime, the police service can't provide the consistently high levels of service the public would hope to receive.

Against the most serious criminality, and especially terrorism, policing can be particularly effective.



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At its core, the problem is that the demand for policing considerably outstrips supply.

In the words of one chief constable: “victims of ‘less serious’ crimes receive a limited service, if any service at all”. Some of our inspections bear out this downbeat observation. And it applies to many forces – even those that perform comparatively well. For example, in 2018/19, Durham Constabulary, a force with an outstanding HMICFRS grade for effectiveness⁶⁹, assigned a positive outcome⁷⁰ to only 13 percent of burglaries and 14 percent of vehicle crimes recorded in 2018/19, compared to 23 percent of violent crimes.⁷¹ While positive outcome rates were higher in Durham than in England and Wales as a whole (6 percent, 3 percent and 13 percent respectively), it still supports the suggestion that victims of ‘less serious’ crimes are unlikely to see their offenders brought to justice.

With the policing of fraud, performance across England and Wales is particularly poor. There are an estimated 3.7 million frauds each year, most of which aren’t recorded, let alone investigated.⁷²

Even with more serious crimes that are recorded, there are problems. Reports of rape have trebled over the past decade, with over 55,000 recorded in 2019.⁷³ But there has been a clear fall in the volume of police referrals to the CPS and a decrease in the number of charges of, and prosecutions and convictions for, rape.⁷⁴

There are other areas of concern too. For example, some crime investigation processes have been reduced to little more than a telephone conversation with the victim, in which just the basic facts of the allegation are recorded. Also, for those trying to contact the police using the 101 non-emergency number, call waiting times can be unacceptably long.

At its core, the problem is that the demand for policing considerably outstrips supply. The extra capacity provided by the 20,000-officer uplift programme will narrow the gap, but it won’t close it. And it will create higher public expectations, particularly in relation to police visibility – for example, calls for a greater deterrent police presence in cities, towns and villages.⁷⁵

Many people would favour the return of the old-fashioned village bobby. But the old ways of doing things are no match for the increased complexity and volume of modern crime. For example, effective investigations into child sexual exploitation (including allegations of non-recent offences), modern slavery, human trafficking, cybercrime and many other crime types demand specialist police capabilities, training and resources.

The old ways of doing things are no match for the increased complexity and volume of modern crime.

Even the most basic investigations very often need specialist expertise for examining digital devices. These are often delayed and time-consuming. And, when they are carried out, they often involve vast amounts of material, creating substantial investigative and disclosure demands. Analysis by the College of Policing shows that, every year, each digital investigator receives over 300 exhibits to examine.

This isn't just about mobile phones and memory sticks. Investigations can involve satnavs and car computers, wi-fi routers, speech recognition devices (such as Amazon Alexa), laptops, tablets and home PCs, and CCTV recordings. Some investigations also involve analysing social media, or other databases, networks and cloud-based storage.

In very many respects, the police are struggling to adapt to the challenges associated with the scale and complexity of modern criminality. For the public, this often means lengthy delays in investigations, and therefore delays in justice. With the number of internet-enabled devices in the average household set to increase, this aspect of policing will only become more demanding.

The state of policing I have described has fundamental strengths, but it has weaknesses too.

Conclusion

As this assessment shows, there is much to be proud of in policing in England and Wales. The police service's response to COVID-19 opens another chapter in a long history of commitment to dealing with civil emergencies well.

As the UK adapts to a 'new normal' involving social distancing in some form or another, for the foreseeable future, the police will face more demands. This isn't just about COVID-19, for which the public's resolve to comply with the restrictions on movement may increasingly be tested. Demands of the kinds I described earlier can be expected in future years, and there will be new ones too. The uplift programme provides some confidence that the service will have more capacity to meet them, but the planned increases in resourcing need careful handling. The number of new recruits required is very substantial indeed and of course they can't all become experienced police officers overnight.

And, as welcome as it is, the uplift isn't the sole answer to the question of how to improve effectiveness and efficiency in policing. An examination of police funding arrangements is long overdue. Its outcome should be a fairer distribution of funds between forces, and longer-term settlements that enable police leaders to make longer-term investments.

The state of policing I have described has fundamental strengths, but it has weaknesses too. To build on the strengths and overcome the weaknesses, the service needs highly capable chief officers. For this, it must get better at identifying its most talented future leaders, nurturing their development and helping them rise to the top. The service needs leaders with the determination to reshape the 1960s structure into a 21st-century structure. It needs leaders with the service-wide influence to design more coherent collaboration arrangements and put them onto stronger foundations. It needs leaders who will exploit the capabilities of technology, to build sustainable, evidence-based solutions to policing problems.

In all these respects, there is a great deal more that the Home Office, the College of Policing and HMICFRS can do to help chief constables and local policing bodies secure improvements in police effectiveness, efficiency and service levels. These improvements would help the service to carry the weight of public expectations more comfortably.

But there is an even greater prize: a highly efficient and effective police service functioning with other safety-critical essential public services in a more integrated way, systematically breaking the cycle of offending. It would be to the considerable advantage of society. It would save vast sums of public money. Most importantly, it would save lives. And it would improve the quality of exponentially more, by sparing people the experience of being a victim of crime, or of becoming an offender.

If leaders in policing, other public services and Government all work together, that prize can be won.

