

POLICE RE-STRUCTURING IN ENGLAND AND WALES

PROGRAMME AREA RESPONSIBILITY: CORPORATE STRATEGY

CABINET

17TH NOVEMBER, 2005

Wards Affected

County-wide

Purpose

To consider the Council's response to the West Mercia Police Authority following the publication of Her Majesty's Inspectorate of Constabulary (HMIC) report, "Closing the Gap" and the subsequent letter issued to Police Authorities by the Home Secretary.

Key Decision

This is not a Key Decision.

Recommendations

THAT Cabinet considers responding to the West Mercia Police Authority expressing:-

- (a) its support for the establishment of a West Mercia Strategic Police Service on the grounds set out in the report;**

and

- (b) if such a proposal is unacceptable to the Home Secretary then its reluctant acceptance that the only viable alternative in the context of the West Midlands would be that of a Strategic Regional Force. As currently understood, such an alternative would be wholly unacceptable to the population of Herefordshire unless they could be convinced that there was an associated real intent to delegate responsibility for policing outside the definition of Protective Services to the local command unit, namely the Herefordshire Division.**

Reasons

It is important that the Council should address the future policing of the area given the importance of effective policing to the local community.

Considerations

1. The Chief Constable attended the meeting of Council held on 4th November, 2005 to give a presentation on the issues. The majority of Members of the Council were present and a copy of the presentation is, therefore, attached to the report for ease of reference.

Further information on the subject of this report is available from
N.M. Pringle, Chief Executive on (01432) 260044

2. In outlining the considerations, therefore, this report does not seek to repeat all the points set out in the Chief Constable's presentation but summarises for Cabinet the principal issues.
3. The Home Secretary's letter of 22nd September, 2005 contained the following statement:

"I am clear that any proposals put to me by the end of year must be ones that design in capacity and resilience to deliver, through an integrated framework, both protective services and neighbourhood policing to national standards and in the quickest possible timescales."
4. Alongside that issue, the Home Secretary has also given an indicative size of a minimum force of 4,000 officers or 6,000 total staff. Other important features in the Home Secretary's design criteria are the need to recognise criminal markets, particularly the issues of cross-border criminality, geography, co-terminosity within existing regional boundaries, historical or regional identity, clarity of command and control and accountability, and costs and efficiency.
5. The first of the HMIC's reports was to examine the police services' capacity and capability to deliver what are termed "Protective Services". The broad conclusion was that bigger "strategic" forces are better able to deliver Protective Services and bigger "strategic" forces offer significant savings in organisational support costs. For these purposes, Protective Services are defined as major crime (homicide), serious organised and cross-border crime, counter-terrorism and extremism, civil contingency, critical incidents, public order and strategic roads' policing.
6. The attached presentation from the Chief Constable effectively covers the issues around the funding and efficiency of the current West Mercia Force and the current performance enjoyed by residents of the West Mercia Force. Those are clearly set out in the accompanying presentation and are not, therefore, repeated in this report.
7. The geography of the police forces in the West Midlands militates against a combination with Staffordshire although such a combination would meet the design criteria set by the Secretary of State in terms of size. Similarly, a combination with Warwickshire would offer no advantages in reaching the design criteria in terms of size and neither of those combinations would effectively recognise the pattern of crime within the West Midlands Region. There is, therefore, a stark choice between what in terms of the design criteria would be an "undersize" force based on the existing West Mercia policing area or what might be seen by some as an "oversize" force based on the region. Whilst it was accepted that some of the disadvantages of the size of the regional form could be mitigated by much more extensive devolvement to the Command Unit, i.e. Herefordshire Division, such devolution has always proved difficult to secure in practice.
8. There would also be concerns given the current pattern of resourcing of the respective police forces in the West Midlands that still further burdens might be placed upon the council tax payers of Herefordshire for no gain in service. That point was not made aggressively but given the respective crime statistics for the West Midlands' conurbation, it is difficult not to anticipate that resources would be drawn away from the rural areas such as Herefordshire to address the higher levels of crime within the urban conurbation of the West Midlands. That would accentuate the already higher percentage of spend by the council tax payer in Herefordshire when set against the overall policing bill.
9. Of 43 forces within England and Wales, West Mercia is almost at the median position

with over 20 forces being smaller in size. Although there was only limited time for discussion at the meeting of Council on 4th November, on the part of those who spoke, there was a clear preference for the retention of a West Mercia based strategic force. If such a force could not be retained, then the main emphasis was on securing the maximum devolution to the individual command base, i.e. the Herefordshire Division.

Alternative Options

The alternative options are set out in the Appendix containing the Chief Constable's presentation.

Consultees

The Council is a consultee on the police re-structuring in England and Wales.

Risk Management

The Council needs to take a strategic view on the risks or otherwise to the population of Herefordshire of the options for the future strategic policing of the area.

Background Papers

None identified.