

REPORT OF THE MEETING OF THE WEST MERCIA POLICE AUTHORITY HELD ON 13 DECEMBER 2005

Performance

1. The Police Authority has congratulated the Constabulary on being assessed the best performing force in the country for 2005 by Her Majesty's Inspector of Constabulary (HMIC).
2. Key facts included:
 - reduced crime in all key areas by 11%.
 - reduced domestic burglary by 19%
 - reduced vehicle crime by 9%
 - one of a small number of Forces to have reduced violent crime - a 15% reduction, and is the second best Force in the country for the number of these offences it detects
 - retention of the Charter Mark status, reflecting its commitment to customer quality of service. "West Mercia is a Force that puts customer satisfaction at the heart of everything it does".
3. The importance of the partnership work between the Constabulary and the Police Authority, together with that of other partner organisations in the Community Safety and Criminal Justice fields, was highlighted and recognised.

Police Structures

4. In September 2005, HMIC published a report entitled 'Closing the Gap' which reported on Protective Services (Level 2) and identified a national shortfall in service provision. The Home Secretary wrote to Chief Constables and Chairs of Police Authorities setting out a programme for the review of restructuring options, for shortlisting and identification of a preliminary preferred option by the end of November and final report by 23 December 2005.
5. In accordance with the Home Secretary's request, a report evaluating all the available options and the West Mercia Police Authority's proposals for a shortlist for further progression was submitted to the Home Office. The Police Authority identified two options as suitable for further progression – A Strategic Force retaining the West Mercia boundaries, and a Regional Force option incorporating West Mercia, West Midlands, Staffordshire and Warwickshire.
6. While falling short of the indicative 4000 police officer figure in the 'Closing the Gap' Report, West Mercia, as referred to above, has been assessed as performing well above most other forces of a comparable officer/staff establishment with regard to Protective Services, and at least as well as a

number of significantly larger forces. It was felt that further work on identifying the extent of the 'gap' in those services should be undertaken and costed.

7. In terms of geographical area West Mercia is already a strategically sized force and there are fears that its excellent performance and level of local police services might be placed at risk in any reconfiguration of policing priorities in a Regional force.

8. A professional assessment of policing services carried out by the Force's Executive Panel considered that an improved West Mercia Force, called the West Mercia Strategic Police Service (WMSPS) option, offered slightly higher service delivery than a four force Regional option, without introducing any of the significant risks and uncertainties that a merger with three other forces would introduce.

9. At the beginning of November 2005, the Police Authority and Constabulary commenced an extensive consultation programme, which identified all available options while highlighting two lead options.

10. The methods used to consult were an on-line and postal survey, a free phone service number and an MORI-poll telephone survey. Written responses to the Police Authority were also encouraged and actively sought from key stakeholders.

11. The majority of respondents supported a West Mercia Strategic Police Force (83% survey, 94% written, 96% telephone), including the 4 top tier authorities and key Criminal Justice partners. The MORI poll had resulted in 67% of respondents in favour of the West Mercia Strategic Police Force option.

12. The members of the Police Authority were briefed on the work undertaken on both options and indicated to the Home Secretary at the end of November 2005 that its preliminary preferred option was for the West Mercia Strategic Police Service. In particular the Authority heard the extent to which Protective Services could be enhanced in West Mercia, the costs and implementation programme involved and the extent to which budget reconfiguration could release the necessary funding to deliver those improvements without increasing precept demands.

13. At the same time the Authority considered the extent to which the Neighbourhood Policing programme could proceed given the existing readiness of the West Mercia force and the availability of government grants and partnership support. The Authority was also aware that they could not so easily predict the costs, savings and priorities of a theoretical Regional force. Members received reports on the estimated set up costs and estimated efficiency measures, and the degree of uncertainty surrounding them.

14. A number of concerns were identified by the Authority, including the very short timetable prescribed by the Home Secretary; the limited range of options available for consideration given the very restrictive criteria attached to the review process, particularly the criteria that forces should comprise not less

than 4000 officers or 6000 staff in total; and the Financing, Presenting and Governance arrangements.

15. The Association of Police Authorities is also seeking satisfactory assurances on several issues from the Home Secretary.

- An appropriate timescale for proper community consultation coupled with satisfactory arrangements for appropriate parliamentary scrutiny;
- Funding and financial issues;
- Governance and accountability arrangements.
- Substantial implications for the workforce, including transfers of officers and staff; standardisation of terms and conditions; application of TUPE; officer and staff welfare and morale.

16. The Police Authority confirmed its support for the West Mercia Strategic Police Service option at its meeting on 13 December 2005 and a submission to that effect has been made to the Home Secretary.

17. Further work will commence to develop and clarify the impact which a West Mercia Strategic Police Service would have on the options available to the other Police Authorities in the region (Staffordshire, Warwickshire and West Midlands) and how such an outcome could complement and support the overall Protective Services resilience of the Region.

Budget 2006/2007

18. The Government has announced the proposed finance settlement for 2006/07 and 2007/08 which gives a guide to the amount of grant which West Mercia will receive in those years.

19. There will be new arrangements for accounting for police pensions, which the Police Authority has generally welcomed. The grant support for police pensions is to be taken out of the police grant which supports the revenue account and the cost of pensions will be separated from the general cost of operational police services. The operational revenue account will pay a pension charge of 24.4% of police salaries into a separate pension account (the operational revenue account will also pay for certain costs in respect of ill health and injury pensions into the separate pension account.). This separate pension account will pay the actual cost of all pensions from 1st April 2006. The Home Office will then pay a grant to this account to meet any actual deficit on the account.

20. Nationally the headline announcement by the Minister of State gave prominence to a 5% increase in Government spending on policing in 2006/07 and a 4.5% increase in 2007/08. This increase includes national policing issues and specific grants to police authorities.

21. The increase in general grants to police authorities is at an overall level of 3.4% in 2006/07 (minimum 3.2%, maximum 3.7%). The level for 2007/08 is for a minimum of 3.7% and a maximum of 3.8%.

In the underlying methodology of distributing police grant, the Government has adopted a new method, which is detrimental to the long-term interests of West Mercia. However, in years 2006/07 and 2007/08 there is a system of “floors and ceilings” to prevent dramatic changes in the level of grant. West Mercia has once again received the minimum “floor” level of increase.

22. The Police Authority is considering proposals to develop the service to enhance Level 2 policing, increase the number of Community Support Officers and introduce a new Initial Police Learning Development Programme. It is anticipated that these improvements can be achieved by limiting the precept demand to around 5%, through continued efficiency, use of reserves and prudent borrowing and seeking improved Government Grants.

23. Although the Authority considers the budgetary position described above to be reasonable and sound basis for planning 2006/07 and the following year, there are further risks attaching to the period from 2008/09. The Government’s plans do not look beyond this date for specific grants or for general grants. In particular, the new funding formula is only sustainable for West Mercia by virtue of the protective floor of around £9m per annum. The Authority will be making written representations on the provisional police funding settlement expressing their concerns.

Setting Priorities for the Policing Plan 2006/07

24. The Authority is consulting stakeholders on the priorities for policing in 2006/07. Whilst the Constabulary already performs strongly it is proposed to further improve by:

Improving Local Policing Services

- Local policing teams – more officers and staff (a further 118 Community Support Officers will be recruited in 2006-7).
- More responsive policing.

Investing in Protective Services

- Enhanced CID
- Enhanced Counter Terrorism
- Enhanced Civil Protection

Investing in the Infrastructure and Equipment

- New buildings
- Modernised equipment
- Better Call Handling & Responsiveness
- Implementation of national Quality of Service Commitment
- Implementation of Initial Police Learning and Development Programme (IPLDP) for better probationer training.

Community Support Officers

25. The Police Authority has approved a bid for an additional 301 Community Support Officers (CSOs) under the Government’s Neighbourhood Policing Fund 2006/07 and 2007/08.

26. 100% funding had been provided to employ an additional 118 CSOs for the equivalent of 3.5 months during 2006/07, together with an one off grant to help establish these new officers.

27. In the financial year 2007/08 the Home Office will provide 75% of the funding of the 118 CSOs, leaving a balance of £767,000 to be funded locally, together with funding for six months to provide a further 183 CSOs

28. The Home Office has indicated that Community Safety is a shared outcome and important for regeneration, continued development and the successful delivery of other outcomes around liveability, including health, education and housing. The Home Office consider that engaging partners for both funding and to deliver actions quickly is important and it is, therefore, intended to endeavour to attract partnership funding commitment to meet the financial balance.

29. In 2008/09 the Home Office will provide 75% funding (£3,500,000) and this will require partnership funding and commitment to meet the balance of £1,189,500.

Force Performance Awards

30. The Police Authority is keen to recognise the good work undertaken by police officers and staff and has agreed a sum of £1000 to support the Force Performance Awards.

Best Value Reviews

31. As part of the programme to ensure Best Value across all the Constabulary's functions a review of Health and Safety, Occupational Health and Welfare has been completed.

32. A number of improvements will be implemented all of which have no resource implications. With respect to the provision of medical services for detainees held in custody there have been some changes in the level of expertise required for the provision of medical services. This change opens up potential synergies between this review, the Best Value Review of Custody and other areas with medical/ welfare input. In order to ensure West Mercia achieves optimum 'Best Value', options within this current review with a resource implication have been put on hold whilst further research is undertaken to determine the most appropriate means of providing all of West Mercia Constabulary's medical requirements.

West Mercia 2004/05 External Audit Letter

33. The external auditors, PriceWaterhouseCoopers have presented their 2004/05 Audit Letter stating that once again this was a very positive audit letter.

34. Significant challenges facing the Authority in the immediate future included communicating developments to the workforce; use of management time in managing change; maintaining focus on meeting operational targets.

35. The Authority has been encouraged to continue to consider carefully future levels of reserves and balances; and to continue to monitor the level of vacancies within the Force.

36. PricewaterhouseCoopers had made two statutory recommendations on the annual policing plan for 2004/05 and these had been responded to positively. There is some development needed on the annual effectiveness review of the system of internal control and this will be addressed with the Treasurer.

Police Property Act 1897

37. During 2004/05 approval was given to retain for police purpose a computer, chain saw and hedge trimmer, which had been seized.

Professional Standards Update

38. The Authority has noted that there has been a decrease in local resolution but a 25% increase in the number of finalised complaints.

39. The HMIC Baseline Report outlined a strong performance in Professional Standards with some areas for improvement. A Police Staff Investigation Manager has been appointed to address these and a further report will be submitted to the next meeting of the Authority's Human Resources Management Panel. The Authority has congratulated the Department on its improvement.

Signed on behalf of the
West Mercia Police Authority

Paul Deneen
Chair

Further Information

Any person wishing to seek further information on the subject matter of this report should contact David Brierley or Ian Payne on Shrewsbury (01743) 344314

List of Background Papers

In the opinion of the proper officer (in this case the Director of the Police Authority) the following are the background papers relating to the subject matter of this report:

Agenda papers for the Annual Meeting of the West Mercia Police Authority held on 13 December 2005.