

REPORT OF THE EXTRAORDINARY MEETING OF THE WEST MERCIA POLICE AUTHORITY HELD ON 21 MARCH 2006

Police Restructuring

1. The Home Secretary wrote on the 3 March 2006 to all police authorities, county, district and unitary local authorities in the West Midlands region announcing that he proposed to make an order amalgamating the Staffordshire, Warwickshire, West Mercia and West Midlands police areas with effect from 1 April 2007.
2. Under the provisions of the Police Act 1996 consultees have until the 2 July 2006 to make any objections.
3. An extraordinary meeting of the West Mercia Police Authority was held on 21 March 2006 when it was unanimously decided to continue to oppose the Home Secretary's plans to force a merger. The Police Authority remains committed to its view that an enhanced West Mercia Strategic Police Service is the best option for local people.
4. The results of the consultation on police restructuring are shown below and the Police Authority thanks all the councils, stakeholders and members of the public for their input regarding this issue.

Method	Support West Mercia Strategic Police Service	Support Regional Strategic Force
Written responses	92%	4%
Phone in survey	96%	3%
Survey	84%	13%
Mori poll	67%	17%

5. In publishing his reasons for abolishing West Mercia Constabulary the Home Secretary gave as the principal reason to ensure that 'Protective Services' were sufficiently provided within the region.
6. West Mercia Constabulary already provides a high level of 'Protective Services' and the Police Authority is currently in the process of significantly enhancing the number of staff it has to deal with serious and organised crime, murder investigations and firearms incidents.
7. The Police Authority's major concerns with the merger proposals are outlined below:

Costs and Council Tax

- Abolition and merger will be costly. Over the last few weeks the estimates of costs and savings have varied considerably. Sets up costs are currently estimated by the Home Office to be £51 million.

- ❑ Calculations of net annual savings arising from the change proposals have also varied widely, but at present are estimated at £15.3 million. Whether that level of savings will be realised in practice is unknown.
- ❑ The Association of Police Authorities has called upon the Government to bear the costs directly. The Home Office has indicated willingness to fund the reasonable net set-up costs but the details of this offer are far from clear and remain subject to negotiation.
- ❑ Council Tax for policing is currently much lower in the West Midlands conurbation than in the rest of the region. Council Tax equalisation is essential, but how this will be achieved and over what period is still unknown.
- ❑ A continuing concern is that amalgamation will adversely impact the overall level of police resources available in the West Mercia area.

Engaging with our Communities

- ❑ West Mercia is already 'fit for purpose', with more than 4000 staff and on-going recruitment of a further 400, is already a Strategic Police Force, both in terms of area and capability.
- ❑ West Mercia Police Authority and the Chief Constable do not accept the claims made in respect of necessary minimum size of force, and question whether there has been any real examination of optimum size. If the forced amalgamation goes ahead, existing Partnerships will be affected and both the Crown Prosecution Service and Her Majesty's Courts Services would be involved in additional restructuring, disruption and costs.

Efficiency and Effectiveness

- ❑ West Mercia has been assessed as a highly efficient and effective organisation and is widely recognised as being one of the best performing police forces in England and Wales. It already covers a huge area comprising the historic counties of Shropshire (including Telford & Wrekin), Herefordshire and Worcestershire. It achieves excellent results with a low level of Government grant and modest expenditure per head.
- ❑ The Police Authority is currently implementing a comprehensive programme of investments in both protective services and neighbourhood policing that aim to build upon the strong foundations already in place.
- ❑ The claimed financial and efficiency case for a regional-size force is far from convincing and has simply not been demonstrated.

Alternatives to Merger

- ❑ There is no need to change West Mercia's boundaries.
- ❑ West Mercia is able to meet the core responsibilities of policing in a more efficient and effective manner than the Home Secretary's proposals.
- ❑ West Mercia is currently enhancing its protective services with an extra £2.9m of investment in 2006/7. Already a strong performer in this area, these

additional resources will provide top quality teams, available to work collaboratively with our neighbouring forces if the need arises, and capable of responding to any threats that may emerge.

Governance and Accountability Issues

- ❑ The proposals appear to envisage that each County or Unitary Council will have just one seat on the new strategic Police Authority. This is a considerable reduction from the existing levels of local representation on police authorities.
- ❑ The Police & Justice Bill, currently making its passage through Parliament, proposes new sweeping powers for the Home Secretary. When combined with a new policing landscape with substantially fewer police forces, this threatens to substantially increase central government control and direction of policing.
- ❑ Under the Home Secretary's proposals, local police divisions are expected to be subject to greater levels of scrutiny by and accountability to local Councils. The mechanism for this remains unclear, as does its link to the role of the Strategic Police Authority.

Rushed Timescales

- ❑ The process of restructuring the entire framework of policing in England and Wales has received only a few months consideration.
 - ❑ The Government timescales for merger in the West Midlands is currently 1 April 2007. Most of the other authorities in the country facing a forced amalgamation by the Home Secretary are to be given until 2008 to organise and work towards mergers.
 - ❑ There is absolutely no need for the situation to be any different in the West Midlands.
8. West Mercia Police Authority has sought additional information from the Home Secretary to enable it to prepare a fully worked up objection to the proposed amalgamation order, though at present that information has not been received. The Police Authority intends to take such further steps as appear appropriate to oppose the merger.

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 meeting of the West Mercia Police Authority held 21 March 2006.