

Welcome to the latest edition of the Police Authority's e.newsletter designed to keep you informed about policing developments in Bedfordshire.

Issue 6 - September 2010

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1. Policing in the 21st Century

In late July, the Home Secretary announced the Government's plans for policing, which include greater collaboration between police forces; more use of local volunteers; and promises of less bureaucracy, greater access to information and regular beat meetings. However, the most controversial element is the proposal to introduce directly elected Police and Crime Commissioners (PCCs) to replace Police Authorities.

The Government states that Commissioners will ensure the police are held to account by the public and their role will incorporate holding the Chief Constable to Account; representing and engaging local residents; setting priorities and agreeing a strategic plan for the force; setting the force budget and the precept; and appointing and where necessary firing the Chief Constable.

In short, one person will be elected to undertake a role currently carried out by 17 members and supporting secretariat. However, it does not appear that this will reduce the amount of administration and bureaucracy, as this individual will appoint their own supporting team and it proposed that there will also be a panel of people in place to overview the work of the commissioner, known as Police and Crime Panels.

The proposed timescales will see the first elections take place in 2012, with Commissioners elected to serve a four year term, for a maximum of two terms.

Bedfordshire Police Authority members, having considered the proposals carefully, do not believe that PCCs can improve upon, or even deliver, the current system of governance and accountability. They have also questioned the need for change of such magnitude in the current age of austerity, when public sector funding is reducing and the demand for services is likely to increase. Change will inevitably lead to a dip in performance and additional cost at a time when attention should be focused on maintaining services and efficiency savings, both of which the Police Authority is arguably the best placed organisation to deliver.

2. Change in the Age of Austerity

Bedfordshire Police Authority has an enviable track record for driving efficiency savings and ensuring value for money. For example, between 2006-7 and 2009-10 alone the Authority has driven an efficiency programme amounting to £17.9M of which £12.5M is cashable savings.

In the current climate, with guaranteed funding cuts on the horizon (although the extent of these are still under wraps), it seems highly questionable to abolish the very body that has the most experience in efficiencies and funding issues.

The Authority has considered the cost implications of the new proposals, which will inevitably land firmly on the wallet of the local council tax-payer one way or another. They are, it is believed, considerable. The cost

of the elections alone has been conservatively estimated at approximately £50M although firmer figures are being prepared nationally. In addition, the salary of a PCC (another figure still to be unveiled by the Government), given the complexity of the role, will have to be commensurate with that of a Chief Constable or similarly qualified person. In addition, the PCC will appoint a support team of indeterminate size, the proposed Police and Crime Panel will inevitably have significant overheads of its own while the prospect of a referendum on the policing precept heralds further ill-considered and as yet unidentified costs.

At the current time there is no proven cost benefit in making these changes yet the Government has said this an age of austerity. We are struggling to identify the austerity in these plans. There may well be an appropriate time to consider new models for governance arrangements but we do not believe that is 2010.

3. Police Authority Visibility

The Government's proposals state that Police Authority's are largely invisible. However, a recent survey in Bedfordshire showed that 64% of the respondents knew about the Police Authority and our role.

This was not a huge surprise. We know from experience that members of the public contact us, particularly if there is a topical issue that they feel strongly about. The Authority also obtains a significant amount of coverage in the local media, which many people state as their preferred method of obtaining information. In addition, all our Committee Meetings are open to the public, and Police Authority members take part in the local community safety forums all of which raises the visibility of members' work.

4. Policing should remain Non-Political

The Authority has very real concerns that Directly Elected PCCs will lead to the politicisation of policing. As Chief Constables will be hired and fired by an individual who has been elected on a manifesto of aims, objectives and probably ambitious promises, it is hard to see where impartiality can lie when it comes to prioritisation.

Elected commissioners, on whatever mandate they achieve their status, will be obliged to be sympathetic to supportive groups. There will be concern about their own prospects of re-election and therefore it is likely that there will be push towards addressing high profile 'populist' crime instead of the underlying strategic issues.

The Authority is concerned that under the proposed arrangements, local policing priorities could become victim to party politics or single issue campaigns while underlying drivers such as serious and organised crime and counter terrorism will be downgraded.

The Authority believes that chief officers must not be driven by political whim or extremist views introduced as an election ticket and is concerned that consciously or unconsciously, it is likely that PCCs will wield influence over the way the county is policed.

There is also a significant level of concern that single issue pressure groups will be able to get representatives elected to this very powerful and influential position thanks to their ability to garner significant support from their own members. Already the BNP has confirmed that it has people interested in these positions and said it is highly likely it will stand in as many forces as it can.

5. One Person to Fit All?

The Police Authority, with its mix of independently appointed and locally elected councillor members, provides representation to the whole community. It also ensures that geographical, diversity and equality factors are taken into account. Can just one person do this?

The Police Authority offers the skills and experience of its 17 members. Amongst its membership are specialists in areas such as Audit, Finance, Human Resources, Equality and Diversity, whose expertise has helped improve policing in Bedfordshire. For example, Bedfordshire Police has retained its Investors in

People accreditation and is acknowledged as an employer of choice. The levels of sickness have plummeted and modern management techniques have been introduced, freeing up officer time and putting patrols back out on the streets. Our elected (Councillor) Members listen to local people and understand their priorities, hence the focus on neighbourhood policing. How can one person deliver all this? And how many people will actually vote for a PCC? Just 25% of the local electorate turned out to vote for the first Mayor of Bedford and by its own admission the Home Office is not sure of a high turn-out for Police Commissioners. Please, go on-line and take part in the poll on our website www.bedfordshirepoliceauthority.co.uk

In addition, we do not believe that people from under-represented groups will stand for election. The right to do so may exist, but logically they are unlikely to have the necessary party machinery or backing to physically undertake an election campaign. This again leads back to the fact that only those on a political ticket or with a well funded agenda will be able to stand.

6. Just for the Record – Vote Now

This is not a 'save our role' exercise. We strongly support reform where the benefits are plain to see, but we do not believe in change for change's sake.

The commissioner, the support team and the Police and Crime Panel will between them take responsibility for areas such as:

- Holding the Chief Constable to Account – Police Authorities already do this
- Appointing and where necessary firing the Chief Constable – Police Authorities already do this
- Representing and engaging local people to ensure that policing is available in and responsible to local communities' needs – Police Authorities already do this
- Driving collaboration – Bedfordshire Police Authority has led the way in collaboration
- Commissioners will play a considerable role in community safety – the Police Authority already works with the local CSP

The consultation period closes on 20th September 2010. Please let the Government have your views. We would also like to know whether you would or would not vote for a directly elected Police and Crime Commissioner – visit the website and answer the question on the homepage. www.bedfordshirepoliceauthority.co.uk

And finally...

If you know of anyone who may like to receive a copy of this, please forward this email – and please copy us in so that we can include their address on our distribution list.

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