

# **A force for change: policing after the pandemic**

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October 2020

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# About

*Reform* is established as the leading Westminster think tank for public service reform. We are dedicated to achieving better and smarter public services. Our mission is to set out ideas that will improve public services for all and deliver value for money.

We work on core sectors such as health and social care, education, home affairs and justice, and work and pensions. Our work also covers issues that cut across these sectors, including public service design and delivery and digital public services.

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## **About the Author**

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## **About *Reform Perspectives***

These are long essays, akin to a newspaper long reads, showcasing a particular opinion or angle on a policy issue. These are meant to be thought provoking, challenging the status quo of public policy.

In July, the Chancellor fired the starting gun for the first Comprehensive Spending Review since 2015. He did so amid the most challenging fiscal period in the post-war era.

“Taking steps to cut crime” was originally at the centre of the Government’s priorities.<sup>1</sup> The pledged increase of 20,000 officers and a new National Policing Board with an outcomes framework has signalled a genuine shift in approach to law and order.<sup>2</sup> After years of chronic under investment, the original spending review planned to invest to drive down today’s crime and future proof our response to tomorrow’s challenges.

The original fiscal envelope may now be challenged in our new economic reality but the need for safety and security remains an essential part of any recovery agenda. The investment in policing is more important than ever as our service helps the public navigate the pandemic and the significant impact that the deep economic shock is having on our communities.

Additional investment is not, however, sufficient on its own. ‘Building back better’ requires a more reformist approach to public services and a shift in policing’s focus and operations will be needed to tackle the complex safety problems many communities now face.

## A tangled landscape

The Prime Minister’s Crime and Justice Taskforce – a cross-Whitehall cabinet committee set up at the start of the year – is a clear signal that cutting crime is not just the job of the police. Yet achieving a system-wide response is going to take a concerted effort.

One of the unintended consequences of austerity has been an increasingly siloed approach to reforming services as sectors have looked inwards to reduce the cost and scope of provision. Major reforms – from free schools to the Transforming Rehabilitation programme – have also contributed to a more atomised landscape. It has never been harder to get people to concentrate on transforming *places*, not simply services.

Accountability is also fragmented between local, regional and national tiers, as is the information on what is happening. Devolution doesn’t have enough pull to get things done and there is not enough push from government. Most importantly, which agencies are directly accountable – and accessible – to local people in their neighbourhoods?

The recently announced review of Police and Crime Commissioners and public safety roles for mayors is timely<sup>3</sup> as is emerging thinking on the shape of local government. The Government should go further and consider how other services, even national ones, could be made statutorily accountable or answerable at a local level for their role in ensuring public safety.

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<sup>1</sup> HM Treasury, ‘Chancellor Launches Comprehensive Spending Review’, Press Release, 21 July 2020.

<sup>2</sup> Home Office, ‘National Policing Board’, Web Page, GOV.UK, n.d., accessed 15 September 2020.

<sup>3</sup> Kit Malthouse, ‘Launching a Review of the Police and Crime Commissioner Model: Written Statement’ (UIN HCWS416, 22 July 2020).

While the Government appears to have strong devolution instincts, its policy agenda is very much being driven from the centre. The Prime Minister's cross-departmental Crime and Justice Taskforce is a recognition of this need for join up and momentum at a national level, but this will easily fail to deliver systemic change without a greater connection between to local leadership on the ground.

## Lessons from the past

Government needs to create a system incentive to shift the default from 'policy in Whitehall' to 'delivery in place'. The desire to relocate parts of the civil service as part of a 'levelling up' agenda can bring economic benefits but, without a shift in policy accountability, it is just geography.

In this sense, we must learn from the past. Lord Heseltine's Liverpool Taskforce of the 1980's and Tony Blair's New Deal for Communities in the 2000s tied the success of parts of the country to the national mission. I saw first-hand working on the New Deal for East Manchester that what happened there mattered not just in the City Council or the police, but in the heart of government. It happened because Ministers and officials were engaged and situationally aware.

Achieving the new Government's 'levelling up' agenda will require the same level of central commitment to local success, and it means joining the dots of accountability. The Government should create Permanent Secretaries for Place.

These senior officials, based across the country, would lift government's gaze outside the M25. They would be charged with making sure place-based turnaround outcomes are delivered and ensuring that national agencies are both accountable for local delivery and answerable to local people. In some sense these could mirror the departments in devolved nations. Their focus would be the delivery of cross-cutting government priorities, rather than protecting the sovereignty of any departmental agenda.

## Tackling the democratic deficit

No matter how good the State is, however, it is local people who build communities, and the public need a bigger role in transforming their communities – they should be an active part of decision-making, not passive recipients of it. This was part of the founding principles of Peel's Police that saw professionals augmenting the public's role not replacing it. David Cameron's Big Society was poorly timed and defined alongside a prolonged period of austerity, but 'taking back control' should be the mantra for communities not just Brexit.

In East Manchester, the active role local people played in decisions about the regeneration of where they lived was essential to success. Decent people who knew their community well, but who had lost hope in state agencies, were critical partners in making sure what we did made sense, and that we actually did what we said we were going to do.

The energy and ambition is out there, but, crucially, without deep public involvement in designing the solutions they will lack legitimacy. Over a thousand residents in West Midlands communities are part of Streetwatch and patrol their streets with their neighbourhood policing teams, taking care of their friends and neighbours.<sup>4</sup>

People are well aware of the challenges the country faces and supporting them to create cleaner, greener, friendlier neighbourhoods through community guardianship will be essential – both in achieving sustainable change and in ensuring public agencies are legitimate and relevant.

The early days of the pandemic adversity drew our communities together as we clapped for carers and looked out for our neighbours. This is clearly fraying as the pandemic continues. Now is the time to re-inject a sense of togetherness as we make a concerted effort to give communities a role.

## A sharper mission

What does this mean for the police? Sir Michael Barber's recent report for the Police Foundation has set out the challenge policing faces.<sup>5</sup> While funding has fallen, the policing mission has expanded, with an ever greater requirement to manage complex social needs.

The police will always have a role in dealing with vulnerable people, but the depth and breadth of services falling to the police is overwhelming. This is hampering our ability to respond to new and complex crime while maintaining visible policing and safety in the places where the public expect to see active policing. To address this challenge, we must ask: are the police providing services their unique role make them unsuited to?

If the additional 20,000 officers are not to be consumed in trying to deal with complex needs in communities – which the pandemic and economic shock will surely increase – then decisions must be made on the extent of the police role in providing social services.

## Precision policing

There must also be recognition that crime does not fall evenly across the country. Some places and communities are disproportionately impacted and addressing their needs can have an outsize difference on crime rates.

These tipping point communities glow red hot with their challenges: 4 per cent of the West Midlands Police area accounts for 16 per cent of the region's crime. These areas are home to 14 per cent of offenders. Like many other parts of the country, they stand out for their overlapping and connected challenges: crime, extremism, housing and health problems, poor educational outcomes and reduced life chances.

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<sup>4</sup> West Midlands Police, 'Get Involved', Web Page, n.d., accessed 15 September 2020.

<sup>5</sup> The Police Foundation, *Public Safety and Security in the 21st Century*, 2020.

These tipping point neighbourhoods are actually quite small in number. More than 50 per cent of homicides occur in the top 30 per cent most deprived areas of England and Wales and 50 per cent of victims and offenders live in these areas.<sup>6</sup> This concentration occurs across almost all of the crimes in the Government's outcomes framework.

Let us be under no illusions. These are the very communities that are going to be hit hardest economically by the fallout from the pandemic. They are often areas with lower trust in the police and public services.

Regrettably these are also the areas where funding for policing and other key services has fallen most heavily and where local taxation is least able to bridge the gap. Targeting sustainable funding, resources and the attention of all agencies to these tipping point areas is going to be critical. As is aligning national and local accountability.

We need to start by genuinely understanding the breadth of challenges these areas face. In this regard we have incredible opportunities. The expansion of big data analysis has the potential to create unprecedented insight into our communities: who are the families in greatest need, where are the most vulnerable individuals, which are the high demand locations, and what services are involved in these communities? Today we can access deep insight into the risks and issues these areas face.

West Midlands Police is one of the first police forces in the world to create a Data Science Team. The potential of this work is enormous. We have recently mapped our organised crime groups based on twelve years of data. The connections across this crime ecosystem are painting a rich picture of possible intervention points. Our work on violence and offender management is also helping to develop a higher resolution picture of complex problems and a precision policing response to them, but it needs to go further than the police.

Getting this data together across agencies and then building a connected strategy is the first hurdle – public services simply do not work in this way. Many are in the foothills of data exploitation with neither the capability to deliver nor the vision to see what can be achieved. Government has set out a desire to build a Crime Lab that we expect to see funded through the spending review. The intention is to predict future crime threats and such capability is critical, but integrated placed-based data could provide the engine for far more effective and precise intervention.

## Getting serious on organised crime

Sir Craig Mackey's review of Serious and Organised Crime<sup>7</sup> is expected to shape the spending review's approach to how law enforcement meets the threat from organised crime. In the last few months, the National Crime Agency (NCA) and police forces have made a huge impact on organised crime following the success of an international operation that penetrated EncroChat, an encrypted telephony system widely used by

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<sup>6</sup> Nick Morgan et al., *Trends and Drivers of Homicide*, 2020.

<sup>7</sup> Home Office, 'New Review Will Enhance Response to Serious and Organised Crime', Press Release, GOV.UK, 29 October 2019.

criminals. 746 arrests, and the seizure of £54 million in criminal cash, 77 firearms and 2 tonnes of drugs, has shone a very clear light on the scale of organised criminality.<sup>8</sup> Similarly, fraud accounts for 44 per cent of crime and huge economic loss which the service is grappling to respond to.

Despite the scale of this threat, a third of the NCA's budget is granted on an annual basis and Regional Organised Crime Units lack sustained funding or clear capabilities.

7/7 showed that policing had to change to meet the new threats from terror. We worked hard on the structures needed and created the Counter Terrorism Network, recognising the need to create locally grounded but highly sophisticated capabilities to meet the new threat. Venetic – the operation that brought down EncroChat – is the organised crime equivalent of 7/7 and the response can be no less ambitious. It is a critical feature of this spending review not just for the safety of communities, but also for our nation's prosperity and recovery. There will need to be enhanced law enforcement capabilities to disrupt the digital space now occupied by organised crime, but also significant capacity to address the scale of this challenge.

## Conclusion

These are challenging times for our country, but the focus on health, prosperity and safety that seems to be at the heart of the spending review is welcome. Securing a solid settlement after years of budget reductions and uncertain funding is critical. But cutting crime is going to require a focused drive from government to establish real accountability from top to bottom. Within this, public trust must be nurtured through meaningful engagement. To meet the complex crime and safety challenges ahead, national and local public services must stand with the police as active – and accountable – partners.

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<sup>8</sup> National Crime Agency, 'NCA and Police Smash Thousands of Criminal Conspiracies after Infiltration of Encrypted Communication Platform in UK's Biggest Ever Law Enforcement Operation', Press Release, 2 July 2020.

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ISBN 978-1-910850-41-1