



*If the public are to have confidence in their police, it's vital that they meet in non-confrontational situations. But developments within the Met threaten to move warranted officers more and more into positions when they will be required to use their powers of coercion*

# Why foundation of policing could founder

**MET FED SPECIAL BRIEFING**



**A**t a time when London faces an unprecedented terrorist threat, the strength of its police force is under demonstrable threat.

It stems from a Home Office initiative aimed at reforming the Police Service in England and Wales, and from a spending review being carried out by the Metropolitan Police Service.

The Mayor of London and the Metropolitan Police Authority say that they are committed to increasing police officer numbers in London.

But alarming portents are emerging from south east London, where an experiment is being run to see how the Home Office's vision of the future will work in practice.

The project – one of a number around the country – has been running in the Borough of Bexley for over year. It is being hailed officially as a great success and a team of press and publicity officers have been put to work to ensure the public understands all the good news.

What the press officers are not telling the citizens of Bexley is that they are to have fewer police officers in future.

One of the cornerstones of the

## Revealed: how police reform experiment has put pressure on officer numbers

Home Office's police reform programme is the transfer of more and more tasks which today are undertaken by fully warranted police officers to civilians, such as police community support officers.

The Home Office maintains that this will free up police officers to undertake what it terms 'front line' policing.

Sceptics see it as a means of reducing costs while maintaining a façade of a full-strength police force.

'Police Reform' is one of the Home Office's flagship policies and it was understandably anxious to ensure that the Bexley project went smoothly. The borough's police were therefore given a thumping £2.5 million government special handout to spend over two years – money they would ordinarily only be able to dream about.

It enabled them to maintain their existing number of full police officers as well as recruit the bodies necessary for a civilianisation programme.

But now the money is running out and, lo! The number of full police officer posts in the borough is to be cut by 23.

An evaluation of the Bexley project by the Independent Institute for Employment Studies on behalf of the Met stated unequivocally that the new working methods would mean fewer police officers across the board.

It is inconceivable that the Metropolitan Police Service will not try to replicate the Bexley project in every London borough. Its appetite for police reform of this sort is well documented.

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# Policing's foundation could crumble

When the Home Office unveiled its current policing vision almost two years ago in a consultation document called *Building Communities Together*, the Met vowed its support with almost indecent haste.

Scarcely was the ink dry on the government consultation paper when the Met produced its own 48-page document in response (which it initially posted proudly on its web site, then hastily withdrew as difficult questions began to be asked).

The Met's document explained: "The MPS contends that it is time to examine the Police Service workforce and determine what proportion needs to be made up of fully-warranted officers, with that power to use legitimate force. Across the total workforce, that might amount to some 50 per cent..."

The Met Federation noted at the time that this would lead to a cut of over 8,000 police officers in London.

So a roll-out of the Bexley model across London seems almost certain to lead to a reduction in the number of police officers borough by borough.

The Bexley model indicates that to maintain the current number of officers in all of London 32 boroughs, with the

**The Federation believes that the public would rather be policed by warranted police officers**

proposed new methods of working, would require an additional £40 million-plus a year.

That sort of money would buy a great number of extra police officers if it wasn't frittered away on bringing in more civilians.

Bexley is not the only place trying out the new working methods. Surrey Police have their own project whose advocates are on record as anticipating a cut in police officer numbers in the county of several hundred - and it only has 1,800 at the moment.

The Metropolitan Police Federation believes that, given the choice, the public would rather be policed by warranted police officers than by civilians. And they are right for many reasons.

One of them concerns the issue of resilience. While it is undeniable that police officers are called upon to carry out jobs which do not require police powers, they are available to switch to duties which do require those powers



**‘They will appear, like some army of the night, only to subdue someone’**

at any time.

A civilian doing a job which currently would fall to an officer, could not, of course, take on a full police role in a similar way.

The new working methods entail jobs such as statement-taking being given to civilians and especially to retired detectives. But these ex-detectives will stop work completely one day and as the pool of police officers from which they are drawn shrinks, so will the number of retired officers available to do this work.

Civilians who have never been police officers will then be needed, with all the implications that has for training and costs.

All-civilian statement-takers could miss opportunities that police experience would enable them to spot.

Important as these considerations are, they pale into insignificance compared with one major ramification which strikes at the very foundation upon which policing in this country has been built.

What distinguishes the warranted police officer from every other member of the so-called 'police family' is the legally-bestowed ability to use legitimate force.

If police officers are limited to duties which involve the use of police powers, it necessarily means that they will appear on the scene, like some army of the night, only to subdue someone or prohibit members of the public from some course of action.

Goodbye, London's Bobby, welcome: the enforcer.

In the 1990s, the media made much play of 'cop culture' - sometimes referred to as 'canteen culture' - which was alleged to afflict police officers. This culture manifested itself, so the pundits claimed, in an aloofness by police, who were inward-looking and out of touch with the public.

Whether that was true or not, the withdrawal of officers from day-to-day policing activities could well induce such a culture in the future among officers recruited after the current interaction between police and public has become a thing of the past.

The police need to enjoy the confidence of the public. That confidence will be difficult to win if the police, and those who are policed, only ever come together at times of conflict.

It is vital for both sides that they are able to meet in non-confrontational situations if the police and the policed are to form and maintain a healthy partnership.

The bedrock of policing in this country has always been the fact that its citizens are policed with their consent. To fracture that bedrock would be a perilous undertaking.

## Too-speedy review raises concerns

Considerable uncertainty continues to surround the direction in which the Met Police's Service Review may be leading the force.

The publicly stated aim of the Review is to examine how the Met spends its income and how it might spend it more efficiently in the future to make more money available for front-line policing.

It is not, the Metropolitan Police Service has insisted, about cost-cutting.

But it cannot be disentangled from the 'workforce modernisation' concepts embodied in the Bexley project. Indeed, it is understood that the Met believes the project should inform and guide the Review.

Certainly, one of the ideas being examined as part of the Review is that of using warranted police officers largely in roles that require the use of police powers, with greater use being made of police staff such as Police Community Support Officers.

This, of course, carries with it all the risks inherent in the Bexley project.

The Federation has welcomed the decision to abandon some of earlier ideas thrown up by the Review which did smack of cost-cutting - such as denying sick pay to probationers and paying recruits on basic training nothing at all.

But the way in which other suggestions are being taken forward raises serious concerns.

The exercise is being managed by the Service Review Team, while Management Board decide which of the ideas for change that have been culled from around the organisation should be taken forward, and which dropped.

Their decision should be informed by a body called the Challenge Panel. This comprises representatives from staff associations and various organisations with an interest in London's policing, or professional knowledge about the issues in question. Its job, as its name suggests, is to

challenge the ideas put to it.

The panel is divided into three sections - Stakeholder Members (the staff associations), Business Members and Partner Members. But the staff associations are in the dark about how the other panel members have reached their decisions or if, indeed, they have challenged the ideas at all.

The Federation is also concerned about the speed with which the Service review project is being propelled forward. Its impact on the policing of London could be massive. Yet although it only began last spring, Management Board are due to consider its recommendations on September 5 and 6, and the finished report is due to be presented to the MPA on September 30.

The Federation is also pressing for greater clarity on those recommendations which are being taken forward. At present, it says, they are open to dangerously wide interpretation.