Strategic Police Forces – one step further in the gradual decline of localised policing?

Susan Gatfield-McGloin

The underlying theme of this article is the ongoing concern about the potential erosion of ‘localised’ policing. The objective is to consider the development of the English and Welsh forces, up to and including the recent proposals for ‘strategic forces’. From 1829 until the late 19th century, a system of local forces was gradually established. The smallest forces were first compelled to merge with their larger neighbours, to promote efficiency, in 1888. At this time views were first expressed that police forces should remain under local control, so that local community needs could be best managed. The Police Acts of 1946 and 1964 led to further reductions in the number of forces, to improve efficiency and effectiveness. Currently there are 43 forces in England and Wales. A recent series of government consultation documents discussed police service issues, culminating with HMIC’s “Closing the Gap” report of 2005, which declared that the current system was “no longer fit for purpose”. The Home Secretary has since set out “radical” proposals for new ‘strategic police forces’ requiring most of the current forces to amalgamate with up to 3 other forces, in order to provide effective ‘protective services’ to the communities of the modern England and Wales. When the proposals are considered within their historical context, they appear to be simply part of a gradual evolution away from the numerous small forces of the past, to improve efficiency and effectiveness. It is concluded that such changes are now necessary, when society is faced with threats such as domestic extremism and organised crime. If the promise that amalgamation will not be to the detriment of the front-line operation structure is sincere, there appears to be little ground for the concern that strategic police forces are one step further towards the decline in localised policing.

This article will consider the changing nature of the English and Welsh police, specifically the issues surrounding the government’s recent proposals for amalgamation of the current 43 forces to a much reduced number of ‘strategic’ police forces. It will begin with a study of the developments since the establishment of the modern police service, in order to place the proposals in their historical context. It will then consider the findings and recommendations of various consultation documents, including Her Majesty’s Inspectorate of Constabulary’s (HMIC) “Closing the Gap” report, which prompted the proposals for amalgamation issued by the Home Secretary. An assessment will follow of the possibilities for, and the potential effects on, the local force, Hertfordshire Constabulary. The underlying theme of the essay is the ongoing concern about the potential erosion of ‘localised’ policing.

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The history of modern policing dates back almost 200 years. In 1822 the Home Secretary, Sir Robert Peel, set up a select committee to consider the existing state of policing within London, which comprised a mixture of watchmen, constables and

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1 D. O’Connor CBE, QPM, Her Majesty’s Inspectorate of Constabulary ‘Closing the Gap – A Review of the ‘Fitness for Purpose’ of the Current Structure of Policing in England and Wales’, September 2005

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Bow Street Patrols, with the intention of centralising them as one body. On 29th September 1829 the Metropolitan Police was formed. Across much of England and Wales at that time there were a variety of localised patrols and watches performed under the control of local authorities. Following the successful introduction of the Metropolitan Police, the Municipal Corporations Act 1835 was passed, which applied to 178 town boroughs in England and Wales. A key provision was the appointment of a watch committee within each town borough, whose task it was to appoint a local police force. One example is the St Albans City Police Force which was formed in 1836, with an initial strength of four men. The Rural Constabulary Act was passed in 1839 to establish regulated forces in rural areas. Implementation of both Acts was slow but in 1856 the County and Borough Police Act was passed, which made the formation of a local police force an obligation upon all rural county and town borough councils. Consequently, 239 separate forces were established. The Act also created Inspectors of Constabulary, who, like today’s HMIC, reported to the central government on the efficiency of forces.

During the latter years of the 19th Century three different kinds of police authority emerged: the Metropolitan Police was headed by a Commissioner with direct responsibility to the Home Secretary; the town borough forces were headed by a constable responsible to the local watch committees; and the rural counties were policed by forces headed by a chief constable appointed by, and responsible to, the county magistrates. During this period there persisted “noisily expressed” beliefs that local police forces should be under local control, but attempts were made by central government to deal directly with chief and head constables, bypassing the various local police authorities.

Between 1856 and 1918 a number of minor legislative provisions were implemented, which effected further changes to the number of forces across England and Wales. Inspectors of Constabulary at this time estimated force efficiency principally on the number of officers per member of the local population. Many small forces were considered inefficient on this basis. Consequently, the Municipal Corporations Act 1877 was passed prohibiting new small boroughs from forming police forces, and the Local Government Act 1888 which compelled the smallest borough forces to amalgamate with larger forces.
The First World War “placed many new demands and responsibilities upon the police which they were hard pressed to fulfil”\(^\text{12}\). There followed a series of police strikes during 1918-1919, in response to which the government commissioned the Desborough Committee of 1919\(^\text{13}\), which proposed further amalgamation of smaller borough forces with surrounding constabularies. However, this was only partially realized. The Home Office made fresh recommendations for the reduction in the number of forces to both the Royal Commission on Local Government in the 1920s and to the Select Committee of 1932, but again these were not fully implemented\(^\text{14}\).

In 1935 Colonel J.C.Wedgewood made a speech to the Home Secretary warning him of the potential disadvantages of centralised policing: “I prefer my local police force, though it many not be so efficient and may be a bit more extravagant, because … the people know them. One thing I would ask the Home Secretary to avoid, and that is more centralisation of authority … In every case … the cry is ‘The bigger we can make it the better it will be.’ They do not understand how much is lost by lack of local knowledge, local interest and local control”\(^\text{15}\).

During World War II force amalgamations were considered for areas believed vulnerable to invasion. In 1943 the 26 forces on the south coast were merged into 6. The amalgamations were considered very successful in terms of efficiency and economy\(^\text{16}\). This led to the Police Act 1946 being passed, which reduced the overall number of independent forces by a third\(^\text{17}\). St Albans City Police Force, which at that time had 67 officers, became part of Hertfordshire police in 1947\(^\text{18}\).

The Royal Commission on the Police in the early 1960s was appointed to redefine the constitutional position of the police\(^\text{19}\). It identified the main problem areas as being ones of efficiency and the ability to bring police to account for their actions, which could be resolved by bringing local forces under more effective control\(^\text{20}\). It favoured the retention of a system of local police forces as there was “much of value in the system”\(^\text{21}\), but with increased central co-ordination. The Police Act 1964 implemented the recommendations of the Commission. It replaced the old town borough and rural county police authorities with new ‘police authorities’, who had lesser powers than their predecessors, whilst increasing the powers of the Home Secretary to be exercised to promote efficiency\(^\text{22}\). The Police Act “effectively rearranged the distribution of power within the ‘tripartite’ arrangement of control over policing, to make the Home Secretary and chief constables the dominant partners and the Police Authorities the subordinates”\(^\text{23}\). In May 1966 the Home Secretary Roy  

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\(^{12}\) Ibid  
\(^{14}\) Supra No.3, p.162  
\(^{15}\) *Hansard*, CCCIV, 16 July 1935, col. 960  
\(^{16}\) Supra No. 3 p.168  
\(^{17}\) Supra No.11, *Policing - Unit 1 - The Historical Development of Policing, Part 1:5 - ‘The Modern Police’* (online) [http://www.leeds.ac.uk/law/staff/lawdw/cyberpolice/pol5.htm](http://www.leeds.ac.uk/law/staff/lawdw/cyberpolice/pol5.htm) (12/02/2006)  
\(^{18}\) Supra No. 4  
\(^{22}\) Supra. No. 19, p.614  
\(^{23}\) Supra No. 20, p.21  
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Jenkins “brusquely told the 127 police forces of England and Wales that many of them were to disappear in a matter of months in forced mergers … He threatened to use his powers under the Police Act 1964 to force mergers if there was resistance”\(^{24}\). By 1969 the number of forces had dramatically reduced to 46. The Local Government Act 1972 re-defined the boundaries of local authorities, which in turn affected police areas, further reducing the number of forces to the current 43\(^{25}\).

In 1981 Lord Scarman prepared a report into the disturbances in Brixton. His recommendations resulted in the passing of the Police and Criminal Evidence Act 1984, which placed increased accountability on English and Welsh local authorities for making arrangements for police and local communities to consult on issues of policing in their own local areas. However, the central Conservative government perceived that the individual forces were setting their own standards and priorities, often without consultation of the communities they were in place to serve\(^{26}\). During the following years there followed a series of Committees, Reports and Inquiries leading to the passing of police reform Acts such as The Police and Magistrates’ Court Act 1994. Under this Act there was a duty placed upon police authorities to “secure the maintenance of an efficient and effective police force for its area” whilst having regard to “any objectives determined by the Secretary of State”.

The Police Act 1996 effectively consolidated various sources of police legislation under one Act of Parliament\(^{27}\). Notably, certain provisions relate specifically to the alteration of police areas. Under s.32 the Secretary of State may order the alteration of police areas in the interests of efficiency or effectiveness. S.33 states the terms and timescales by which any such order shall be made, and how objections are to be dealt with. These provisions are particularly pertinent to the current proposals for Strategic Police Forces, to be discussed later.

When New Labour came into government in 1997 they continued a programme of police reform. A Government White Paper ‘Policing a New Century: A Blueprint for Reform’\(^{28}\) was issued in December 2001. This paper discusses a variety of issues relating to the police, and states, amongst other things, that the “police service needs: a new framework to promote high standards and bring every police force up to the performance of the best … Ultimately there will be a power of intervention for the Home Secretary to ensure that performance improves if this cannot be achieved by any other route”\(^{29}\). The following year the Police Reform Act 2002 was passed. One of its provisions sets out the obligation on a force to take any remedial action necessary, as determined by the local authority and Home Secretary, following a report by the HMIC that a force is inefficient and or ineffective. In considering the potential affects of this Act, Omerod and Roberts state that the “continuing trend towards centralisation … brings with it a consequential loss of local control without necessarily diminishing local responsibility and accountability for policing”, and that

\(^{25}\) Supra No. 20, p. 23
\(^{27}\) Supra No.19, p.621, FN8
\(^{28}\) CM5326 (2001)
\(^{29}\) CM5326 (2001) Chapter 2, p.28-29
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the Act provides “a limited shift towards centralised power, without completely undermining the tripartite structure”\(^{30}\). However, in a differing view, Sullivan argues that the Act is a direct threat to the balance of power achieved by the tripartite system. He believes it likely that the Home Secretary will use his powers to amalgamate forces, potentially to the detriment of ‘localised’ policing: “Perhaps Wales is the best example of such impending amalgamation … Such regionalisation is also an example of how things might go wrong. North and South Wales are criminologically different from each other … Welsh regionalisation will compel Wales’ four forces to amalgamate into one and co-operate with each other”\(^{31}\), despite their very individual local characteristics.

In November 2003 the Home Office published a Green Paper, which again looked into various potential areas for police reform, including operational effectiveness, specifically re-structuring\(^{32}\). It introduced the concept of larger ‘strategic’ regional forces, and of ‘lead’ forces which may develop specialisms in specific areas\(^{33}\). It concluded that the “Government believes the time is right to consider whether the present 43 force structure … is the right one for today’s and tomorrow’s policing needs.”\(^{34}\) Feedback to this document was sought from various groups including police associations and local authorities, and from the general public by way of a consultation questionnaire. In September 2004 a summary of responses received was published by the Home Office\(^{35}\). It broke down the responses into three broad groups: Those who believed the current structure was “illogical and irrelevant to modern society”; those who considered that deeper examination of the existing forces was needed, alongside evidence that larger strategic forces were more “efficient and effective”; and those who opposed restructuring, highlighting concerns that larger forces would be “remote from local communities” and expressing the view that smaller forces often performed better and were more able to meet the needs of their local communities.

In November 2004 a White Paper\(^{36}\) was issued, which acknowledged the necessity for further research, as identified in the consultation responses (as above). It announced that the Home Secretary had commissioned HMIC to examine specifically the issue of force structures in England and Wales, to consider “the extent to which policing can be made more effective through greater collaboration and co-operation between forces”. Meanwhile The House of Commons Home Affairs Committee issued a report on police reform\(^{37}\) in which it stated “From the evidence we have taken it is clear that there is little appetite within the police or within the wider community for a major structural upheaval or for large-scale force amalgamations”.


\(^{33}\) Ibid, p.6.8 – 6.10

\(^{34}\) Ibid, p.32


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On 16th September 2005 HMIC’s report “Closing the Gap – A Review of the ‘Fitness for Purpose’ of the Current Structure of Policing in England and Wales”38 was presented to the Home Secretary. It offers reaching analysis of the current system’s ability to provide “effective and sustainable protective services”. A national assessment of individual forces was performed, using standards identified and agreed with the Association of Chief Police Officers (ACPO). Seven areas of “protective services” were assessed: counter terrorism and extremism; serious organised and cross border crime; civil contingencies and emergency planning; critical incident management; major crime (homicide); public order; and strategic road policing. These activities are considered to cross police borders, unlike ‘local’ crime which can be largely managed within “Base Command Units” (BCUs). To place this into local context there are three BCUs within Hertfordshire Constabulary, covering the Eastern, Central and Western areas of the county. The Report acknowledges that the existing structure has driven down crime and provided policing on a local scale “with considerable success”, but that the same structure constrains the improvement of the protective services. In this area it finds that very few forces meet the required standard, but that the larger forces, with over 4,000 officers, or 6,000 total staff, were more likely to do so. It concludes that the current 43 force structure is “no longer fit for purpose”, and that the goal should be to create “organisations that are large enough to provide a full suite of sustainable services, yet still small enough to be able to relate to local communities”. It considers the various options for change: collaboration between forces; lead specialist or regional forces; federations of forces; and strategic forces. The report recommends “most radical option” of strategic forces, whereby forces would be re-grouped in accordance with a framework for the best achievement of protective service targets, but where local policing arrangements (such as the existing BCUs) would not be disrupted: “There is, in our view, nothing incompatible between a move towards a more strategic organisation and a concentration on delivering more responsible neighbourhood policing. Strong neighbourhood policing is essential to connect with the public and inform the work of protective services. A force which is big enough to deliver protection, but still small enough to identify with local communities, is an attractive one”39.

On 22nd September 2005 the current Home Secretary, Charles Clarke, wrote to all Chief Police Officers and Chairs of Police Authorities of England and Wales, setting out his proposals for new ‘strategic police forces’ based on the recommendations of the ‘Closing the Gap’ report40. He requested that all forces and authorities engage in discussions with their regional partners, to reach agreement on their preferred options for amalgamation. These were to be identified by reference to the nationally determined criteria as set out in the HMIC report: forces to have a minimum of 4,000 officers or 6,000 total staff in order to achieve the capacity necessary for providing protective services, whilst taking into account the local patterns of cross-border criminality, the local geography and forecast performance, and at the same time minimising the costs of change and maximising efficiency savings. It gave a deadline for a short-list of options to be received by the end of October 2005, with firm proposals following by 23rd December 2005.

38 Supra No. 1
39 Supra No. 1, p.17
Following the submission of short-listed options, feedback was provided indicating which of the proposals were most favoured by the Home Office. The possibilities for Hertfordshire and its regional neighbours were as follows: a Regional Eastern force comprising the current forces of Bedfordshire, Cambridgeshire, Essex, Hertfordshire, Norfolk and Suffolk, or two strategic forces, each amalgamating three forces, with either a North / South divide or an East / West divide41.

To ascertain the best options for Hertfordshire, and the Eastern region as a whole, a series of workshops were held, during which senior officers and members of the police authority assessed the capacity of the various combination of forces to achieve the required level of performance in the seven ‘protective areas’, by use of a points system. This was balanced with specific local patterns, such as geographical make-up and criminal activity. For example, the eastern counties all have coastlines, whereas Herts and Essex both border London, with a higher level of cross county criminal activity resulting. Herts and Essex both achieve higher levels of efficiency, whereas Cambridgeshire still holds the reputation of a poor performer following the flawed investigation into the Soham murders. Of those who took part in the workshops approximately 95% were broadly in favour of amalgamation, with the results of the points evaluation equally supporting either a North/South split or an East/West split. It is believed unlikely that amalgamation would have a detrimental effect upon operational front-line (local) policing. The investment required to improve the seven protective services will come from the savings to be made in merging the support functions, such as fleet, not from the reduction in local operations42.

At this time concerns over the anticipated loss of local policing were raised by the local community. In a letter to the Herts Advertiser, a St Albans councillor voiced his fears that “… in any merger you lose identity. Herts residents like having a local police force – it is a unique feature of any county to have a police force …It is assumed by people that economies of scale are the answer to all the problems of cost, but these economies are often not realised and there is also a sense of loss with people left feeling that their needs are not being met, that the police have become remote with the loss of a local bobby … For day-to-day activities a smaller, local force is much better and local intelligence is vital in police work … I cannot see a large centralised system as the answer to our policing needs”43. These concerns differ little to those raised to the Home Secretary some seventy years previously by Colonel J.C.Wedgewood.

It also became apparent that the implementation of amalgamation by all the forces nationwide was not going to be a smooth process. Cleveland Police consulted lawyers over a judicial review on the grounds that the Home Secretary had acted “unreasonably” in pushing through the mergers in such a short timescale. Legal action was also discussed by Essex, Gloucestershire and Lincolnshire forces, with opposition to the proposals being voiced by the Hampshire, Kent, North Wales,

42 Information gained from an interview with Rebecca Turner, Programme Manager, Amalgamation Project, Hertfordshire Constabulary
43 Cllr C. Brazier, letter to the editor, Herts Advertiser, November 10 2005, p.8
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Sussex and West Mercia forces. MPs also began to raise concerns over the speed at which the plans were being introduced and called for a six month delay\textsuperscript{44}. The Home Secretary subsequently issued a leaflet to all MPs setting out the background to the proposals, and the positive changes he believes will ensue\textsuperscript{45}. On 25\textsuperscript{th} January 2006 the Home Office website was updated with details of the provisions of the Police Act 1996 which could be used to order the alteration of police areas\textsuperscript{46} (as detailed earlier in this essay).

On 30\textsuperscript{th} January Hertfordshire’s Chief Constable, Frank Whiteley, and the Chairman of Hertfordshire Police Authority submitted a business case proposing an amalgamation between Bedfordshire and Hertfordshire forces only, rather than one of the options preferred by the Home Office, ie a regional Eastern force comprised of the six current forces, or a North/West or East/West split placing three forces each in two strategic forces. Mr Whiteley’s reasoning is based on his experience in the smaller forces of Cambridgeshire and Northamptonshire, alongside a secondment spent with the Metropolitan Police. He believes that some forces may indeed be too small to provide an adequate range of policing services in the modern world, but equally some are too large, encountering managerial and operational problems. He believes Hertfordshire would benefit from an increase in size, but not to the extent of becoming part of a massive force encompassing half of the Eastern region. “Nevertheless, I am broadly pro-merger, although I believe some mergers make more sense than others.” He expresses discomfort with the “hurried and prescriptive nature of the current process”, and raises the issue of local accountability and the ability of local views to influence local policing within larger more remote forces. “In Summary, I would cautiously support mergers of Forces and in particular I strongly support a Herts Beds merger. In reality, we will probably end up with a bigger merger – with more potential benefits and more risks!!”\textsuperscript{47}.

The most recent updates issued by the Home Secretary were a statement\textsuperscript{48}, and a letter sent to all Chief Officers and Chairs of Police Authorities\textsuperscript{49}, both on 6\textsuperscript{th} February 2006. They inform that following the submissions received from police force areas, HMIC has considered the options put forwards against various criteria. As a result amalgamations encompassing the forces of the West Midlands, North East, North West Regions and Wales have been assessed as “suitable for progression”. Of these only the force of Greater Manchester remains as a ‘standalone’, elsewhere mergers of two, three and four forces are considered acceptable. These areas now have the opportunity to agree to voluntary mergers, or the process of compulsory amalgamation will commence. However, decisions on the other five English regions,

\textsuperscript{44} S. Tendler & G. Hurst ‘Doomed police forces plan to challenge shake up in courts’, The Times, December 20 2005, p.4
\textsuperscript{45} Home Office ‘From Policing the Local Beat to Disrupting Global Crime Networks: Reforming the structure of Policing in the 21\textsuperscript{st} century’, http://police.homeoffice.gov.uk/news-and-publications/publication/police-reform/Final_structures_leaflet_1_.pdf?view=Binary (19/02/06)
\textsuperscript{46} http://police.homeoffice.gov.uk/news-and-publications/publication/police-reform/Restructuring2005-12-08_not1.pdf?view=Binary (19/02/06)
\textsuperscript{47} Private email from Chief Constable Frank Whiteley dated 15/02/06, following request for his opinion on the effects amalgamation will have on Hertfordshire Constabulary.
\textsuperscript{48} http://police.homeoffice.gov.uk/news-and-publications/publication/police-reform/2006_02_06_Restructuring_HS1.pdf (19/02/06)
\textsuperscript{49} http://police.homeoffice.gov.uk/news-and-publications/publication/police-reform/2006-02-06_HS-CHs_Chairs_St1.pdf (19/02/06)
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including Eastern, have yet to be reached. The future of Hertfordshire Constabulary therefore remains uncertain at this time.

When viewing the proposals for ‘strategic forces’ in isolation, they may indeed seem to be a “radical option”\(^{50}\). When, however, they are considered within their historical context, they appear to be simply part of a gradual evolution away from the numerous small forces of the past, for reasons of efficiency and effectiveness. At each stage of this process, protests have been raised from those who believe that increasing centralisation would bring with it a reduction in local accountability and control, to the detriment of specific individual community requirements. Following the introduction of the Metropolitan Police in 1829 a nationwide system of local forces was gradually established in England and Wales. The amalgamation of smaller forces with their larger neighbours, to improve efficiency, first began in 1888, around which time the view that local forces should remain under local control was “noisily expressed”. Concerns persisted into the 20\(^{th}\) century but, following the success of wartime amalgamations, the Police Act 1946 further reduced the number of forces by a third, again for reasons of efficiency and effectiveness. In the late 1960s the Home Secretary manifested his powers to further reduce the number of forces from 125 to the current 43, following the recommendations of a Royal Commission on Police.

In the 21\(^{st}\) century it appears history is repeating itself. Amid objections being raised in relation to the perceived loss of localised policing and the “local bobby” on the beat, the central government have reached the conclusion, based on the HMIC report, that the current 43 force structure is “no longer fit for purpose”. Like Roy Jenkins before him, it now seems inevitable that the Home Secretary will implement amalgamation, ideally with the voluntary support of the current forces, but if necessary, by order, using his statutory powers. In the current situation these powers are to be found in the Police Act 1996, supported by the Police Reform Act 2002. Whilst it is still vital that local communities be protected from local crime, effective ‘protective services’ also need to be in place to counter the threats faced by modern societies, such as domestic extremism and organised crime, which are not executed conveniently within county borders. Strategic forces appear to be the best option to adequately provide these services. However, if the proposals for the retention of local Base Command Units are accurate, and the promise that amalgamation will not be to the detriment of the front-line operational structure is sincere, there appears to be little ground for the concern that strategic police forces are one step further towards the decline in localised policing.

\(^{50}\) Supra No. 1

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