

Notes of Previous Meeting

Safer Communities Board

14 May 2007

at Local Government House

Present

In the Chair:	Cllr Hazel Harding CBE (Lancashire CC)
Deputy Chairs:	Cllr Caroline Seymour (North Yorkshire CC) (Liberal Democrat) and Cllr Graham Brown (Powys CC) (Independent).
Conservative:	Cllr Les Byrom (Sefton MBC); Cllr David Smith (Lichfield); Cllr Clare Whelan (Lambeth LB); Cllr Roland Domleo (Congleton BC); Cllr Robert Light (Kirklees MBC).
Labour:	Cllr Ann Lucas (Coventry City Council); Cllr Mark Burns-Williamson (Wakefield MDC).
Liberal Democrat:	Cllr Paul Porgess (Stockport MBC); Cllr Audrey Jones (Greater Manchester FCDA); Cllr Christina Jebb (Staffordshire CC).
Apologies:	Cllr Andy Sutton (Isle of Wight UA); Cllr Audrey Lewis (Westminster City Council); Cllr Mehboob Khan (Kirklees).
Substitute	Cllr David Lancaster (Salford City Council) (Labour); Cllr Teresa Heritage (St Albans DC) (Conservative).

1. Government Crime Strategy

Helen Murray (Home Office) outlined the new crime strategy to the Board. She explained that there was a need to take a fresh look at crime in an attempt to further reduce the number of crimes being perpetrated. Since 1997, there has been a 35% reduction in crime, but in the last 18 months, this reduction had levelled off, with it becoming increasingly difficult to make further progress. A new set of crime targets will be introduced in April 2008.

Despite the reduction in crime since 1997, there is a perception that crime is in fact increasing; a recent MORI poll found that 63% of those questioned thought that this was the case. The new Home Office strategy aims to close this perception gap through identifying areas where value can be added at a national level. The Home Office has, for example, been working with mobile phone companies to reduce levels of mobile phone theft, something that local authorities would struggle to achieve. This shows how the Home Office is attempting to establish the roles and responsibilities for local authorities and identify where it can add value nationally.

The new crime strategy will also need to make the most of resources that have been reduced in the comprehensive spending review. There will be a new 'joined-up' approach to policies across Whitehall which will be overseen by a new ministerial committee.

The Home Office accepted that there has been too much micro-management in the past, and that outcomes are of the most importance, not how these are achieved.

There needs to be a balanced response to crime; minor high volume crime has recently been the focus of attention, but there also needs to be a greater focus on more serious crimes. This will be addressed through the new PSA (Public Service Agreement) targets.

More also needed to be done on crime prevention. Work has been undertaken with the DfES to provide targeted support and intervention in an attempt to anticipate and address future crime problems.

Local accountability is important in reducing the fear of crime. Neighbourhood policing and the Community Call for Action are both examples of work that authorities should use to increase people's confidence.

The Home Office is prepared to devolve further powers to local authorities to deal with volume crime, but only where there is confidence that the authorities can use these powers effectively. At the same time, more needs to be done at the national level to deal with serious and organised crime.

Further measures, including the Assessment of Performance and Community Safety (APACS), the Police Performance Assessment Framework (PPAF) and the reform of local government all form part of a coherent set of developments that provide a number of challenges and opportunities.

Members questioned Helen Murray on a number of issues following her presentation. The initial question was on where domestic violence fitted into the new crime strategy. Members also asked that the LGA be kept informed of any developments of the strategy with regards to domestic violence. In response to this, Helen Murray told the group that domestic violence can be prevented if the warning signs are spotted early enough. This is where the new strategy's focus on prevention will be of assistance.

Joined-up working with regards to re-offending was also discussed; the National Offender Management Service needs to work more closely with organisations that seek to reduce re-offending. The subject of police funding was also raised, and an example was given of a parish council paying for a police officer to undertake overtime work within the parish.

Helen Murray accepted that further work needed to be done to join up the work of organisations that deal with offender management. With regards to police funding, it was explained that chief officers can direct their resources as they see fit. Realistically, it was also true that BCU commanders have to prioritise their resources as demand outstrips provision. More also needs to be done to reduce the bureaucratic burden on the police, whilst improving the reporting of violent crime, such as those involving knives. Crime statistics need to match the crimes themselves.

Members suggested that joined-up working at a local level also needed to include the health service, specifically with regards to CDRPs where more work could be done to tackle drug and alcohol issues. The Safer Schools Partnership can also be used as a means of identifying potential problems.

A further suggestion was that there had been duplications and inconsistencies between previous strategies, and this needed to be avoided in the future. Questions were also raised over whether the new strategies would also be implemented by the devolved assemblies in Wales and Scotland.

Helen Murray confirmed that both Wales and Scotland are fully involved in discussions on the new crime strategy. All further strategies that are developed by the Home Office will be aligned to the crime strategy. However, both ministers and civil servants need to learn how to devolve greater power to local authorities.

The Chair thanked Helen Murray, on behalf of the Board, for her presentation.

Actions

1. To seek clarification on the terms of reference for the police review being undertaken by Sir Ronnie Flanagan, HMIC.

2. LACORS Update - LBRO

Karen Hill and Sydney Daish from the Better Regulation Office (BRO) talked to the board about the Local Better Regulation Office, a newly formed organisation that aimed to improve the effectiveness and consistency of local authority regulatory services.

The BRO is the part of the Cabinet Office which works with government departments, Europe and local government (80% of inspections in the UK are undertaken by local government) to inject common sense principles into their regulatory work. Regulation can be of great benefit, but its delivery is the key; the regulatory burden on small businesses needs to be lifted, as they feel disproportionately affected by this.

The 2005 budget accepted the recommendations of two reports; the Better Regulation task force (which aimed to reduce administrative burdens) and the Hampton Review on Inspection and Enforcement (which concluded that there should be no investigations unless necessary). Implementation of the Hampton Review resulted in the creation of the Local Better Regulation Office, which would be armed with Macrory powers; a tough set of sanctions for dealing with non-compliant businesses. These powers will be awarded to all local authorities, and this award will not be performance-related.

The LBRO will initially take the form of a government owned company, although it will gain a statutory footing when parliamentary time to achieve this can be secured. This will result in the LBRO having the ability to call on a greater number of statutory powers. The Chairman of the LBRO will be Clive Grace, and announcements on further board members

and staff will be made in the near future.

A formal consultation on the exact nature of the Macrory powers started on the 15th May and will last for three months. How these powers are awarded to local authorities will be part of the consultation process. Safeguards that prevent the misuse of these powers will be built into the system.

The Regulators' Compliance Code has been set up (the code will be enacted in Autumn 2007 and come into force in 2008) with the aim of achieving their objectives whilst minimising the burdens on business through the implementation of Hampton. This will cover national regulators, as well as some that fall under the auspices of local government, including trading standards, environmental health and licensing. Members were asked whether they thought the balance of this was correct.

Karen Hill also suggested that Clive Grace could attend a future Safer Communities Board meeting if Members thought that this would be of use.

Derek Allen (LACORS) explained that the issues surrounding the LBRO and its work are both complex and challenging. The government has taken a robust approach to regulation, and has been suggested that the formation of the LBRO is a heavy-handed response. However, the simplification and reduction of unnecessary regulations is a positive step.

Members asked how local authorities could prosecute large companies when the costs of legal action could be so high, for example with regards to licensing. Would there be extra funding available for this? It was also suggested that the LBRO needs to look at regulation and local authorities in a broader context than is currently happening.

Sydney Daish (BRO) told the group the Better Regulation Office was aware of the cost of prosecutions, and that discussions on how this burden could be reduced were ongoing. This issue could be discussed further with Members if they thought this would be of use.

Karen Hill (BRO) explained that the local authorities with officers and members who understood the cross-cutting nature of regulation were of vital importance. The LBRO will need to collect and disseminate good practise to other authorities to improve understanding.

Members asked whether there would be a change to current licensing regulations; currently, Members can only make representations about a license when they have been notified by a constituent.

Geoffrey Theobald (Chairman, LACORS) told Members that a discussion with the Minister had been held on this subject, and that gambling legislation had been altered to allow Members to make representations on this subject independently.

The Chair thanked both Karen Hill and Sydney Daish for their presentation, who in turn said they were happy to discuss issues further with Members and officers as appropriate.

3. The Best Commission - the way ahead

Claire Holloway (Programme Director) told Members that it was now necessary to transform the aspirations outlined in the Best Report into actions. The principle underpinning these actions must be that the LGA reconnects with member councils, which are also shown the values of continued membership of the LGA. The LGA was working on a prospectus that will include proposals on how the Best recommendations can be taken forward, and it is hoped that this document will be available at the General Assembly in July.

The Chair invited Claire Holloway to attend the next meeting of the Safer Communities Board where Best could be discussed in greater detail.

4. Other Business Update

Members asked whether any further details had emerged concerning the National Offender Management Service Bill.

David Williams (Programme Director) responded by saying that the NOMS Bill will reach the committee stage in the week commencing the 14th May. The general outline of the bill is favourable, but more detail is needed. An update would be included for the next meeting.

Responding to questions, David Williams also told the Board that officers would report back with further details on the form of a new vetting and barring scheme included in the government's Action Plan on Sexual Violence and Abuse; and on work that has been undertaken by the Safer Communities Board with the Association of Police Authorities.

5. Note of the last meeting and actions arising

David Williams (Programme Director) told Members that officers would canvass dates for a Safer Communities Board away day in September.

The note of the previous meeting was agreed.

Date of next meeting

The next meeting of the Safer Communities Board will be held at Local Government House on Monday 16th July 2007.

Home Office response to queries raised by Safer Communities Board Members

Cllr Ann Lucas – what has happened to the Domestic Homicide Review?

At present the Home Office is working with the Department for Communities and Local Government to find a solution to the issues around costs and new burdens that were raised by the LGA during the consultation exercise. Once this has been resolved (we expect that this will be shortly) Ministers will be in a position to make decisions on the way forward.

Cllr David Smith – funding for PCSOs and town/parish councils picking up the bill

The Home Office funding settlement for neighbourhood policing and PCSOs for the current financial year provides £315m to Police Authorities, an increase of 41% over 2006–07.

There is a difference in the rates payable for PCSOs as recruitment has taken place in two main phases. We provide 50% funding for those PCSOs allocated to forces prior to the introduction of the Neighbourhood Policing Fund and 75% of a standard rate for those recruited more recently.

Ministers have made it clear that, in the long term, funding for neighbourhood policing will be rolled into the general police grant, so that it will continue to be available.

But HO should not be regarded as the only source of funding for neighbourhood policing and PCSOs. Since this is mainstream policing activity and community safety is an outcome in which we all share an interest, Ministers believe that police authorities should pick up some of the cost through general police funding, other government sources, local authorities and a variety of local partners.

We know that neighbourhood policing works – increasing public confidence and having a positive effect on crime and anti-social behaviour and we remain committed to seeing it embedded in every community.

Cllr Christina Jebb – what is our strategy for identifying literacy/mental disorder/learning difficulties of offenders in custody?

Police national training highlights the importance of identifying and communicating effectively and sensitively with people suffering from a mental or learning disability. The aim is to ensure that all officers develop an awareness and an understanding of mental disorders and the importance of not making assumptions based on a person's behaviour.

The Codes of Practice under the Police and Criminal Evidence Act 1984 (PACE) provide guidance for custody officers on dealings with mentally vulnerable detainees and, other than in exceptional circumstances, an appropriate adult (someone experienced in dealing with mentally disordered, mentally vulnerable or illiterate people) must be called whenever there is any doubt about a detainee's mental capacity.

If there is any concern that a person may be suffering from an underlying physical or mental illness, the police should act urgently in calling an appropriate health care professional for advice.

Guidance on the Safer Detention and Handling of Persons in Police Custody was published on 8 February 2006. The main impetus behind the Guidance project was to assist in the prevention and reduction of deaths and adverse incidents in police custody by standardising processes and extending good practice. The Guidance seeks to achieve this objective by setting out management issues for forces to address in order to bring their custodial practice into compliance with the standards of custodial care set out in the text. Throughout the Guidance the emphasis is focused on risk assessment and risk management at every stage of the custodial process from first contact to onward referral/remand.

It highlights identifying factors that may at first appear to be symptoms of mental illness but in fact are the result of physical injury such as head wounds. It also identifies how to recognise various physical syndromes such as diabetes, epilepsy, excited delirium etc, whose symptoms may cause violent or changing behaviour which might be mistaken for mental illness. It also focuses on the risks inherent with dealing with the mentally vulnerable and provides advice on how to recognise and deal with them.

Cllr David Lancaster asked about the rationale for identifying the 44 priority CDRPs. What is our benchmark for measuring success and how were they selected?

In order to renew the strategy for delivery of PSA1, to reduce crime by 15%, analysis was carried out to identify 44 CDRPs which had the greatest potential to contribute a further reduction in crime. The 44 were selected on the following criteria:

- Gap from their negotiated crime reduction target;
- Gap between their peers (the most similar group of CDRPs); and
- Direction of travel (crime rising or falling).

Cllr Geoffrey Theobalds believes some authorities are in the wrong CDRP family and would like this examined. When do we review these families?

PA consulting group are currently carrying out a review on behalf of the Policing and Crime Standards Directorate at the Home Office on the way we benchmark performance through the use of 'most similar' groupings. This is part of the work on the development of the new integrated performance management system for police, CDRPs and DATs (APACS). PA will be reporting on the first phase of their work to the APACS Steering Group in July. The plan is to have a method of comparison in place by the autumn in advance of the planning round for 2008/09.