

Improving police accountability: strengthening police authorities

Summary

Police accountability continues to be a subject of national political debate. Both the LGA Executive and the LGA General Assembly have considered the LGA's position on improving police accountability. At the same time the APA is working to strengthen relations between police authorities and councils so police authorities can better hold the police to account. This paper updates members on recent discussions within the LGA and seeks members' views on how the relationship between police authorities and councils can be best improved.

Recommendations

Board Members are invited to:

- a. Note the motion considered at the LGA General Assembly on police accountability, the debate on the issue at the General Assembly, and the LGA Executive's decision on the way forward for the LGA when considering proposals for improving police accountability.
- b. Note the work the APA is doing on strengthening the relationship between police authorities and councils and comment on the points the APA are considering, and whether there are any other proposals that should be considered.

Action

LGA officers to reflect the Board's views in the LGA's work with the APA on strengthening the relationship between police authorities and councils.

Improving police accountability: strengthening police authorities

Background

1. The Policing Green Paper published in July 2008 proposed by reforming the membership of police authorities in order to improve police accountability at the local level. Board members will recall that the LGA ran a cross-party campaign to overturn the proposals to introduce directly-elected crime and policing representatives. This resulted in the government withdrawing its proposals in December 2008.
2. The political debate around improving police accountability continues however, with think tanks like Reform and IPPR producing proposals this year. The three main political parties have also continued to argue for better police accountability. Indeed it remains such an issue that the LGA's General Assembly on the 30 June debated motions from two member authorities about improving police accountability.
3. The LGA itself has agreed that police accountability needs to be improved. In its response to the Policing Green Paper the LGA agreed a set of joint alternative proposals with the Association of Police Authorities (APA) for improving police accountability. A key element within the joint LGA and APA alternatives was strengthening police authorities. Following the presentation from Cllr Burns-Williamson on behalf of the APA about the work they are doing to strengthen police accountability, the Board agreed to work with the APA on strengthening the relationship between councils and police authorities.
4. This paper provides an update for the Board on the debate at the General Assembly, and then seeks members' views on what can be done to strengthen local authority and police authority relationships.

Proposals for reforming police accountability

5. Even though the Home Office abandoned proposals for improving police accountability through directly-elected crime and policing representatives, this has not meant that the debate about police accountability has fallen into abeyance. The Conservatives and Liberal Democrats already have proposals which include a directly-elected element, while Labour continues to develop its own proposals. With the main political parties continuing to debate reforms to police accountability Wakefield and Colchester tabled motions on police accountability for consideration at the LGA's General Assembly. A copy of the motion is set out for members' information in **Appendix 1**.
6. Ahead of the General Assembly debate the LGA's Executive considered the Association's position on the current debates on police accountability. The LGA Executive noted that the Safer Communities Board's current work programme to improve the current police accountability structures, and that given where the electoral cycle has reached this sits alongside other ongoing work with all parties on

future police accountability arrangements. The Executive therefore agreed that rather than making a specific public statement about different parties' proposals, the LGA's work around police accountability is best progressed in a more considered way, privately out of the glare of the media, thus maximising the opportunity to influence and shape the debate and secure the best outcome for local government in any change to accountability structures.

7. As well as having Colchester and Wakefield move and second the motion on police accountability, the debate at the General Assembly involved a number of contributions from the floor. Though there were differing views on whether directly-elected representatives would improve police accountability, there was broad agreement that partnership working had been vital in reducing crime and this needed to be extended and developed. There was also felt to be a need for greater scrutiny of the police, especially at a Basic Command Unit level. It was additionally noted that work by the LGA with the Conservative party on their directly-elected commissioner proposals would see councils providing a scrutiny board to hold the commissioner to account. Officers will be exploring with the Conservative Group Office what the scrutiny process will look like and will report back to the Board. The police accountability motion was then referred to this Board for consideration. Members are therefore asked to note the motion, the debate at the General Assembly and the LGA Executive's decision on the way forward for the LGA when considering proposals for improving police accountability.

Strengthening the relationship between councils and police authorities

8. The importance of partnership working and the need to improve the scrutiny of the police featured in the General Assembly debate and one of the strands of work being undertaken by the APA's Local Accountability Strategy Group is to improve the relationship between police authorities and councils. The main thrust of this work is to ensure that councillors nominated onto police authorities have the skills and training to robustly hold the police to account.

9. Some of the ways of strengthening the relationships between councils and police authorities the APA is looking at include:

- Providing inclusive (rather than prescriptive) guidance to council group leaders in relation to the time commitment, skills, training and diversity that are needed from council nominations on to police authorities.
- The use of agreements between police authorities and their local authorities on the profiles of councillors to be nominated to serve on their police authorities.
- Consideration of the use of annual personal development review processes for councillors serving on police authorities so skills can be further developed.

23 4

- Consideration of strengthen reporting arrangements between police authorities and councils.
- Dissemination of existing best practice between police authorities and councils on nominations and reporting mechanisms.

10. Members views are sought on the ways the APA is considering of strengthening the relationships between police authorities and councils, and whether there any other proposals the LGA and APA should be considering.

Financial Implications

11. This is identified as a key theme in the LGA Business Plan and costs are therefore met from within existing LGA Group budgets and resources.

Implications for Wales

12. Police reforms apply to England and Wales. LGA officers will therefore liaise with WLGA officers and seek their involvement in any LGA activity.

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23 4

Appendix 1

This Association

1. Stresses the need for the Police Service to work closely with Local Councils and other agencies, and commends the successful relationships built up in many Crime and Disorder Reduction Partnerships;
2. Notes that a significant proportion of council tax is spent on policing;
3. Welcomes steps taken to increase the responsiveness of the service and keep the public informed e.g. by crime mapping, policing pledge etc;
4. recognises that greater transparency and accountability are required at neighbourhood, basic command unit and force level but
5. Rejects proposals for the direct election of police authority members or police commissioners and welcomes the Home Secretary's decision not to proceed with such proposals.

The Association calls upon all the major political parties to enter into discussions with it and the Association of Police Authorities (APA) to seek to build a consensus on ways of achieving the objectives set out in paragraph 4 above, without establishing competing mandates with local councils, but means of, inter alia, greater support or all police authority members, training, peer review, closer scrutiny (involving independent members) to enhance the effectiveness of police authorities within the local democratic framework.