

best foot
forward

headquarters' support for
police basic command units

Local policing units have become the prime focus for reducing crime and disorder...

- statutory local partnerships give police divisions – or basic command units (BCUs) – a central role in crime-reduction initiatives
- crime figures are now published at BCU level, enabling comparisons to be drawn between different local areas
- Her Majesty's Inspectorate of Constabulary will inspect performance at BCU level for the first time, from April 2001

... while the police service as a whole faces major challenges.

- forces are striving to increase police visibility and to offer greater reassurance to the public
- at the same time, the service must tackle high-level crime, which is increasingly sophisticated and often transcends force borders

The role and style of headquarters needs to be adapted ...

- headquarters (HQ) control too much BCU activity, instead of delegating responsibility to the local level and holding BCUs accountable for their performance

- one-third of BCU commanders feel that their ability to achieve performance targets is hampered by insufficient local control over resources
- the allocation of resources is too reliant on historical spending patterns and is insufficiently responsive to business need
- only 40 per cent of BCUs hold the budget for police officer pay, and fewer still can meaningfully influence the number and mix of staff

... and a lack of strategic focus means that some HQ support functions fail to meet BCU and force needs.

- fewer than one-half of BCU commanders feel that business support functions such as HR and IT support their priorities well; but they are more satisfied with operational support
- HQ services are not always clearly specified or monitored, and the role of BCUs as 'intelligent clients' for support services is underdeveloped
- a lack of clarity about the respective responsibilities of HQ and BCUs is leading to duplication of effort or service gaps in some areas

Forces need to free up local management and review HQ activity, allowing the centre to concentrate on strategic direction and specialist expertise.

- BCUs should be given the maximum freedom to make operational and resource decisions, within a framework of corporate standards and robust performance management
- geographical variation means that there cannot be a structural 'blueprint' for all forces, but decision making should be local unless there is good reason
- inter-force collaboration across specialist operational and support functions could be extended, generating efficiency savings and enhancing capability

The police service has improved its performance in many areas in recent years. The challenge now is to use the focus on BCU performance to clarify and strengthen the strategic and specialist role of HQ, while enabling local partnerships to thrive.

A local focus for policing

1. Basic command units (BCUs) – territorial divisions within police forces – are now central to efforts to improve police performance. The establishment of statutory crime and disorder reduction partnerships (CDRPs) in 1998 has given BCUs a defined role in local initiatives, while the publication of performance statistics at divisional and partnership levels enables comparisons to be drawn between local services across the country.¹ Beginning in April 2001, Her Majesty's Inspectorate of Constabulary (HMIC) will inspect BCUs in order to identify strengths and weaknesses and to disseminate good practice.

2. The emphasis on local service delivery units mirrors a trend across the public and private sectors. Recent years have seen a fundamental shift in organisational management – including in local government and the health service – towards more responsive services, with a focus on the 'front line', and moving decision making closer to

customers. For the police, as elsewhere, these developments require a reappraisal of the respective roles of the centre and devolved units.

3. BCUs do not operate independently nor can they deliver all aspects of policing; their primary responsibility is to provide basic services – patrol, 24-hour response and investigation of 'volume' crime such as burglary, robbery and theft – and to work with local partners to reduce crime and disorder. Force headquarters (HQ) performs a range of vital functions either in support of, or in addition to, BCU-level activities:

- setting and co-ordinating force-wide strategy, policy and standards;
- scrutinising and monitoring the performance of BCUs and HQ departments;
- allocating resources, in line with the overall budget set by the police authority;
- providing business support – for example, finance and human resources (HR); and
- direct provision of some specialist operational functions and/or support to BCUs in these areas – for example, major

crime investigation and armed response [EXHIBIT 1].

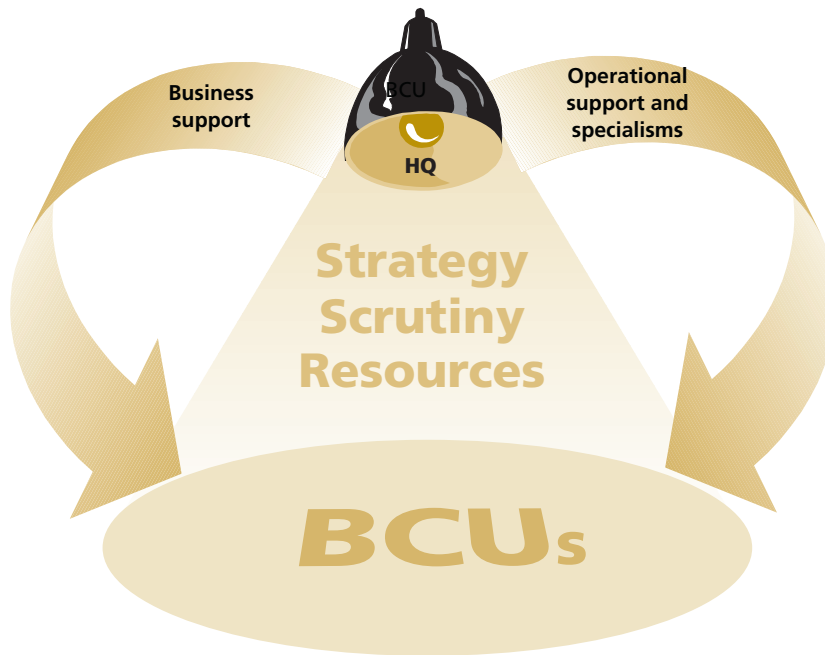
4. Demands on the police service are high. Despite success in reducing burglary and vehicle crime over the past year, violent offences rose by 8 per cent, and surveys show that public satisfaction with much police activity is falling. In addition to reducing crime locally and increasing public reassurance, forces must tackle major criminal activity, which is ever more sophisticated and often transcends force borders. Technological responses are increasingly being developed nationally, alongside best practice approaches such as the National Intelligence Model. As more issues are addressed nationally and basic services are focused at BCU level, the question arises: what should be the role of force HQ?

¹ CDRPs exist at district/unitary local authority level. There are 318 BCUs and 376 CDRPs in England and Wales. Approximately two-thirds of BCUs share a common boundary with, or are wholly enclosed within, a CDRP.

EXHIBIT 1

Main functions and activities of force headquarters

Police HQ is the strategic centre of the force and provides specialist operational and business support.



Source: Audit Commission

principles for an effective and efficient HQ function. In particular, forces and authorities need to review and challenge their approach to the:

- performance management of BCUs as devolved units;
- allocation of resources to BCUs and HQ departments; and
- management and delivery of specialist and support services.

5. BCUs are not all alike. The 318 BCUs in England and Wales range in size from under 100 to over 1,000 officers, from 4,000 to 300,000 residents, and from one square mile to several hundred. These variations have implications for the policing functions that can be sustained at

BCU level, as well as for appropriate managerial approaches (and raise questions for the national policing structure that reach beyond the scope of this paper). Nevertheless, the similarity of policing objectives across the country allows the identification of certain key

Strengthening the performance management of BCUs

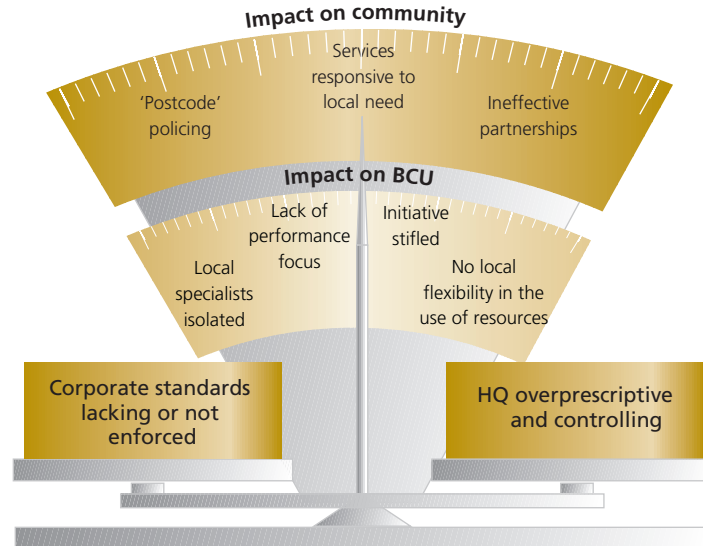
6. Police authorities and forces are now subject to a rigorous performance regime that incorporates best value, efficiency planning, audit and inspection. However, there is scope to modernise management approaches in some areas. While BCU commanders are held to account for crime figures in their area, they do not have a commensurate degree of financial freedom, nor are they always challenged to demonstrate how they have used resources to deliver results. And, in many cases, BCU commanders remain the recipients of force policy, rather than actively contributing to it. They were not members of the main force policy forum in two of the seven forces visited by the Commission's research team.

7. In response to the Commission's survey, one-third of BCU commanders stated that their ability to achieve performance targets was hampered by insufficient local control over resources. Study fieldwork identified particular concerns – previously highlighted in the joint inspection report, *Calling Time on Crime*¹ – around the ability of BCUs to make meaningful contributions to local partnership initiatives without significant

EXHIBIT 2

Striking the right balance between local discretion and central cohesion

Forces need to adopt an approach that encourages local initiative within clear limits.



Source: Audit Commission

delegated powers. There are many examples of successful police participation, but other BCUs are frustrated by their inability to contribute financially (even to minor items such as public information leaflets) and/or the requirement to refer proposals to HQ as a matter of course.

¹ A Thematic Inspection on Crime and Disorder conducted by HMIC in collaboration with the Home Office, Audit Commission, LGA, Ofsted and the Social Services Inspectorate, published in July 2000.

CASE STUDY 1

Performance management arrangements in Lancashire, West Midlands and Durham

Lancashire Constabulary has delegated the management of 80 per cent of its budget to BCUs and HQ operational support divisions. To ensure that BCUs adhere to corporate policy, including agreed policing style, and that wider commitments can be met, an operating policy clearly sets out the limits of BCU autonomy. The policy specifies, for example, a minimum number of operational constables, and minimum staffing levels and training for specialist units. BCU commanders are held to account in a quarterly, face-to-face meeting with the Deputy Chief Constable, a process that is reported to be challenging but constructive.

West Midlands Police has devolved considerable functional and financial responsibility to its BCUs, but within a strong culture of accountability. Both BCUs and HQ departments operate within a performance management framework – *Forward in Unity* – that links their activities to the local policing plan. BCUs have a quarterly review meeting, incorporating performance against targets; financial and staffing position; process audit (to ensure, for example, ethical crime recording practices) and response to new force-wide developments or policies. Devolution has enabled HQ to both reduce its size and sharpen its focus.

Under Durham Constabulary's long-established force philosophy, *Aiming for Excellence*, financial control lies with the centre, but BCUs are fully involved in force business through a system of interlocking policy, strategy and user groups. BCU commanders sit on the force's Policy Advisory Group and are represented on support service user groups. Similarly, BCU and HQ operations and crime managers meet to share problems and develop policies in 'conferences' chaired by the Assistant Chief Constable every five weeks. The system has proved highly successful in this small, tightly knit force.

Source: Audit Commission fieldwork

8. In a mature regime of devolved management, direct control by the centre is replaced by accountability for delegated budgets through a system of performance measurement and monitoring. Forces are at differing stages in

setting up such systems, and developing the ability of staff to take on their new responsibilities. The most effective adopt a strong corporate approach that encourages local initiative but within a framework that clearly sets

out the limits of BCU autonomy and ensures consistency of service quality [EXHIBIT 2]. They also involve BCUs fully in policy making and provide opportunities for mutual support and learning [CASE STUDY 1].

9. Not all aspects of HQ activity are amenable to a 'command and control' approach and style. The HQ role also includes developing and supporting leadership at BCU level and ensuring value for money and the maintenance of professional standards. For example, most forces would benefit from more frequent one-to-one contact – both formal and informal – between BCU commanders and their line managers. In some forces, such contact is limited to formal performance assessment meetings. The Commission also found that relationships between BCU staff and their colleagues at HQ were sometimes discordant; there is a need to build trust alongside clarity of responsibility.

Allocating and deploying resources in response to need

10. Resource allocation is not an exact science, but it is a matter for concern that one-half of BCU commanders, in response to the Commission’s survey, are unhappy with their force’s method of allocation. Many forces rely too heavily on historical spending patterns, particularly when dividing the ‘pot’ between HQ departments and BCUs. For example, 30 per cent of forces do not use a needs-based formula or assessment to determine civilian staffing budgets. External scrutiny of BCU performance, together with the best value framework, will bring such issues to the fore, as explanations are sought for performance problems. Resource allocation needs to be both needs-based and bottom-up.

11. Almost two-thirds of policing resources are ‘consumed’ at BCU level, yet BCUs manage only one-third of total expenditure. Police pay – by far the largest budget – is delegated in only 40 per cent of forces, and this is usually accompanied by significant constraints, for example an inability to vary staffing levels. Even where local management provides clear incentives for efficiency savings – such as telecommunications or vehicle fuel – budgets are

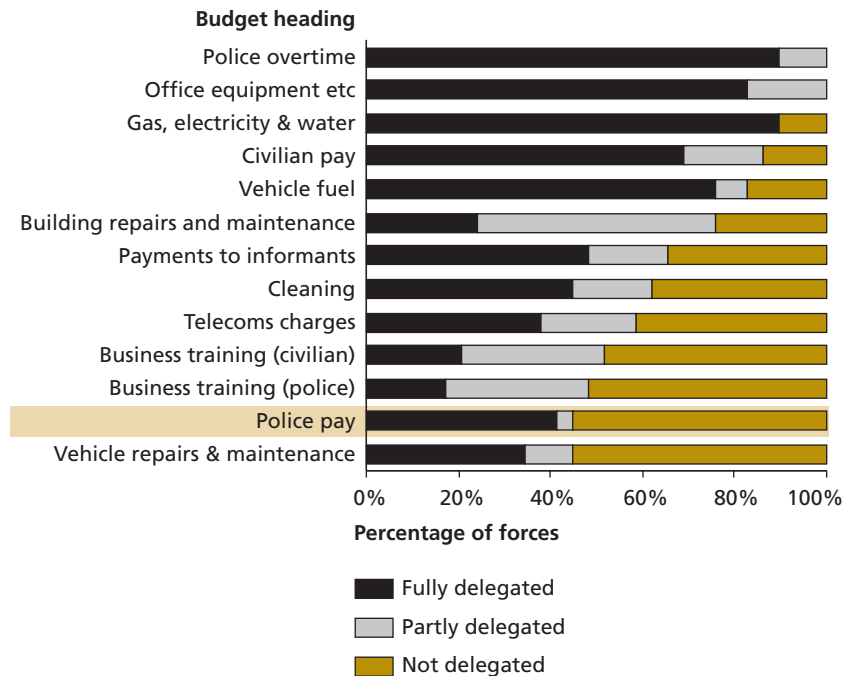
sometimes retained by HQ [EXHIBIT 3]. Where the pay budget is delegated, and BCU staffing levels fall temporarily, the local commander is able to substitute increased overtime to ensure that the overall level of service is maintained. This is more difficult to

achieve if pay budgets are managed by HQ.

EXHIBIT 3

The extent of financial delegation to BCUs

Police pay, the largest budget, is locally managed in fewer than half of forces.



Source: Audit Commission survey of 29 forces

12. Moreover, much existing devolution is ineffective. Three-quarters of BCUs report that they hold some budgets for which spending is not locally controllable (for example, flat-rate recharges against central contracts) and almost one-half are prevented from viring between certain budget headings. To remedy this situation, financial delegation must be implemented carefully; it requires a

reliable IT infrastructure, comprehensive guidelines and scrutiny, and appropriately skilled staff at BCU level. Not all budgets are suitable for local management, but often the biggest barrier to delegation appears to be a fear of letting go. It is for forces and authorities to decide on the most appropriate approach for their particular circumstances. Some

central contingency will always be required, but performance is likely to be best managed where BCU commanders have maximum flexibility to make resource trade-offs, within a clear framework of accountability and standards.



Improving specialist support in collaboration with others

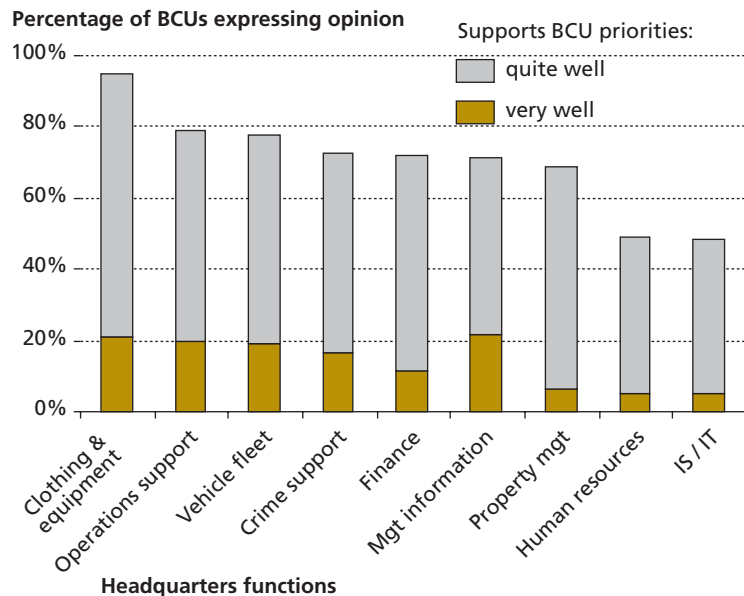
13. BCUs are not autonomous: they rely on both operational and business support provided by HQ. Support should be responsive, of high quality, cost-effective and meet the needs of users. But it often falls short of these objectives. Of 160 BCU commanders surveyed by the Commission about a range of HQ services, 70 per cent felt well supported but only around 20 per cent said that their priorities were very well supported. Fewer than one-half were satisfied with the key business support functions of IT and HR [EXHIBIT 4]. Such results give cause for concern, particularly since demands from BCUs are likely to increase once they become subject to inspection.

14. How could support be improved? The starting point is a strategic framework that aligns support activities with operational objectives, including those of BCUs. Some forces are doing well, developing business planning and performance measurement within HQ departments. However, there is scope for greater BCU involvement. Around 50 per cent of existing service level agreements were drawn up without input from BCU staff and, as a result, many have no practical impact. Headquarters

EXHIBIT 4

BCU views on headquarters support services

Fewer than 50 per cent of BCU commanders believe that functions such as IS/IT and HR support their priorities well.



Source: Audit Commission survey returns from 160 BCUs across 30 forces

departments receiving high satisfaction ratings in the Commission's survey were characterised by visibility, a good understanding of BCU needs and transparent criteria for service access. In return, BCUs need to become 'intelligent clients' in order to make better use of HQ-based

resources. Forces and authorities should use the framework of best value to ask challenging questions of support services [BOX A].

BOX A**Support services - good practice checklists for providers and clients****For HQ support-service providers:**

- How well are your objectives aligned with the policing plan and, ultimately, aimed at improving service to the public?
- Have you asked users, at all levels, what they require and what they think of your services? What changes have resulted?
- Do you have objective and transparent criteria for prioritising need?
- Do your staff get out and about – to obtain feedback from users, identify problems and ensure smooth delivery?

For BCUs as clients:

- Do you consider the contribution of support resources to local objectives when drawing up BCU plans?
- What efforts have you made to better understand the demands on support providers?
- Are you fulfilling your side of corporate policies or service level agreements?
- Do you take opportunities to be actively involved in shaping support services?

Source: Audit Commission

15. Forces currently differ as to whether specialist operational functions, for example, traffic or specialist detective squads, are managed by BCUs or HQ. They also vary in the degree to which business support responsibilities – such as finance or HR management – have been devolved to BCUs. Some variation would be expected in response to differing BCU and force size, but the lack of consistency

even between similar forces suggests the variation does not reflect rational analysis. A lack of established professional practice is likely to mean that valuable resources are being wasted. The Commission hopes that HMIC's BCU inspections – supplemented with other research – will provide insights into what works best (including considerations of operational performance and

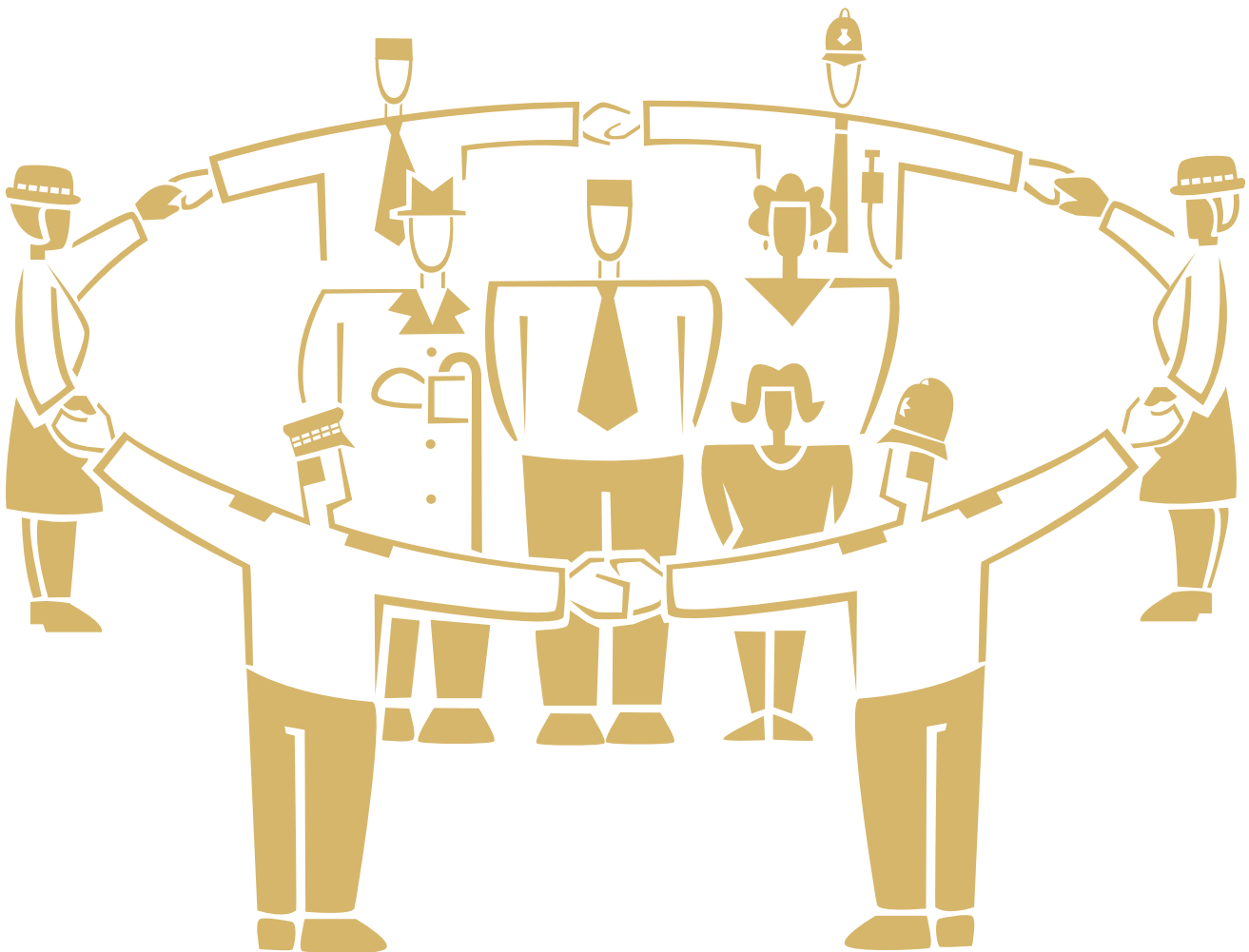
economic viability) and that these will be incorporated into police management training and practice.

16. However forces structure themselves, it is imperative that respective responsibilities are clear. The Commission found some evidence of duplicated effort and service gaps, particularly within the HR function. Several of the forces visited for this study had gaps in personnel policies – for example, relating to staff allowances or transfers – or lacked clarity around the respective roles of HQ and BCU managers in relation to sickness absence. HR is a rapidly developing area for the police service, as witnessed by the diversity and equality agenda, and people management skills require significant development at BCU level. There should be a clear expectation that, where HR (and finance) professionals are employed in BCUs, the role of central departments is complementary and, where possible, reduced in scale in line with the transfer of responsibilities.

17. Encouragingly, many forces already collaborate to provide specialist functions – for example, air support or motorway policing – but there is considerable scope to extend this. Significant efficiencies could be gained through extending

or developing regional consortia in areas such as procurement, police recruitment and training, payroll, information systems, and research and development. The pressure on frontline policing makes it essential that HQ functions are subject to the

same degree of scrutiny as those of BCUs. And the growth in high-level and violent criminality seems certain to stretch limited resources yet further, particularly in smaller forces.



Modernising the role and style of police HQ

18. The current, variable, approach to dividing responsibilities between HQ and BCUs is accurately described by chief officers as the ‘shared model of policing’. While it makes no practical sense for BCUs to be fully autonomous, the relative ‘share’ of each element should be subject to challenge and review. The trend in other sectors is towards greater local differentiation (reflected in the police service by the growing emphasis on community engagement), accompanied by the down-sizing and outsourcing of central support services. While such an approach is not entirely applicable to the police service – where HQ undertakes specialist operational work, over and above support to BCUs – there is certainly scope for a more bottom-up approach to HQ activity.

19. The key issue is not one of structure – which can never be perfect – but of managerial style and process. Delivering effective, efficient and customer-focused policing requires forces to marry central strategy with the meaningful empowerment of service managers. While recognising the need for HQ to retain some flexibility of deployment, a sensible

first principle would be for resource management decisions in relation to BCU services to be taken locally unless there is a clear operational or economic reason making this impossible.

20. At a time of growing demand on the service, it makes sense for HQ to concentrate on the functions that it alone must perform. Alongside strategic direction and balancing demand for resources, this includes an expanding role in assuring performance, value for money and professional standards. Forces and authorities should use the focus on BCU performance – together with the best value framework – to clarify and strengthen the strategic and specialist role of HQ, while enabling partnerships to thrive and respond flexibly to the needs of local communities.

Recommendations

Chief officers should:

- Strengthen performance management arrangements to include greater consideration of value for money and professional standards within BCUs.
- Within a performance framework, and clear corporate policies, allow BCU commanders as much freedom as possible to make decisions in relation to the services they provide, including influence over resource management. In tandem, develop the skills of BCU staff, and provide an appropriate support infrastructure, to enable BCUs to take on these new responsibilities.
- Actively develop and support leadership among BCU commanders through greater one-to-one contact and providing opportunities for mutual learning.
- Make BCU commanders members of the force's main policy team.
- Challenge whether the existing division of roles and responsibilities between HQ and BCUs is the most effective and efficient way of delivering operational objectives.

- Review resource allocation mechanisms to better reflect relative need and strategic priorities.
- Seek and exploit opportunities to significantly extend collaboration with other forces in areas of specialist operational and business support.

Police authorities should:

- Use best value reviews to challenge the role and responsibilities of BCUs against those of the strategic centre.
- Help to develop the force's approach to corporate performance management so that it becomes comprehensive, while enabling local flexibility in response to need.
- Regularly monitor the performance – including value for money – of both BCUs and HQ specialist and support departments.

Heads of support departments should:

- Focus on providing support services that meet the needs of BCUs and link to policing

objectives through business planning, performance measurement and user involvement.

BCU commanders should:

- Develop an 'intelligent client' approach to support services, identifying and communicating need for these resources and considering how they could be better used to help to deliver local objectives.

The Home Office should:

- Use BCU inspections and other research to develop an understanding of:
 - the optimal size and configuration of BCUs; and
 - what works in terms of the management of support functions – and why.
- Ensure that future changes to policing structures are informed by these conclusions.

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 If you want to know more: the full management paper, **Best Foot Forward: Headquarters' Support for Police Basic Command Units** looks at all of these issues in more detail and includes background information, case studies and specific guidance.

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 Audit Commission,
Best Foot Forward: Headquarters' Support for Police Basic Command Units
 (management paper)
ISBN 186 240 288 4
£15.00

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 Available from:
Audit Commission Publications
 Bookpoint Ltd
 130 Milton Park
 Nr Abingdon OX14 4SB
Freephone 0800 502030
