

Police force mergers are unnecessary and miss the point; the best policing is local

Much of the focus during the PCC elections has been on the principle of representation. [Will Tanner](#) argues that localism is equally important and that the future of policing in England and Wales must be local and democratic, not regional and bureaucratic.



At the mid-point of this Parliament, the apparatus of policing in England and Wales is undergoing far-reaching and long-overdue reform, from pay and conditions to the election of Police and Crime Commissioners today. Yet Chief Constables want more: spurred on by tighter budgets and the creation of a single Scottish force north of the border, calls to reorganise the 43-force structure of policing – to a smaller number of larger forces – are [growing louder](#). Sir Hugh Orde, the President of the Association of Chief Police Officers, now argues in favour of merging police forces so often that it has become known as his “broken record speech”.

The call for consolidation is not new. The police service was transformed from an eclectic mix of 243 forces at the turn of the 20th Century to just 43 by the late 1960s, and two Home Secretaries proposed further regionalisation under the last Government. However, recent calls ignore the many principled and practical reasons against merging forces.

Firstly, and most simply, the best type of policing is local. Larger forces, commanded by senior officers at regional level, do not reflect the crime-fighting needs of communities or respond as effectively to their demands. The most successful forces have already shown that small is beautiful. In 2009, for example, Greater Manchester Police replaced larger Basic Command Units with new neighbourhood “hubs” and more local policing teams. Since then, the force has improved response times to some of the fastest in the country and cut investigation times by two thirds, while simultaneously saving £12 million a year. Being close to criminals and communities works.

Secondly, there is no guarantee that mergers will generate significant savings, and in fact would incur considerable upfront costs. The merger of eight local forces into a single national service in Scotland, for instance, is [considerably more expensive](#) over a five-year period than either the local or regional models also considered by Kenny MacAskill, the Scottish Justice Secretary. Charles Clarke’s proposal to replace the 43 forces in England and Wales with 12 regional “super-forces” in 2006 came with an estimated price tag of £1 billion, 10 per cent of the Home Office budget that year.

In fact, forces are already demonstrating that efficiencies can be found without costly and bureaucratic reorganisation. Thames Valley and Hampshire, for instance, now share road policing units and canine units; Warwickshire and West Mercia share everything from an Assistant Chief Constable to neighbourhood policing teams. Advances in technology and procurement mean that common systems and equipment can be achieved without national control. Collaboration without amalgamation is thriving.

Lastly, policing is essentially local in nature, meaning that forces should be accountable to the communities that bear the costs of crime. The Government has recognised this and today’s election of Police and Crime Commissioners in 41 force areas will introduce meaningful democratic accountability into policing for the first time. Any regionalisation would therefore undermine local democratic accountability and widen the gap between police officers and the citizens they serve. The future of policing in England and Wales must be local and democratic, not regional and bureaucratic.

Note: This article gives the views of the author, and not the position of the British Politics and Policy blog, nor of the London School of Economics. Please read our [comments policy](#) before posting.

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