

Home secretary's reforms to make for 'more accountable' policing

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Government plans to scrap specialist policing units and put in place directly elected local police commissioners as part of a major overhaul of the force has been welcomed as an opportunity to make the services more accountable to the public.

Sweeping police reforms

Home Secretary Theresa May has announced sweeping police reforms, which are set out in a consultation document entitled, 'Policing in the 21st Century: Reconnecting Police and the People'.

The 52 page report looks at how this service can become more responsive, accountable and better value for money. 'I am starting an ambitious programme of reform for policing in the 21st Century. At the strategic level, this includes a new National Crime Agency to strengthen the fight against organised crime and toughen policing at the border.

I am also setting out how we will ensure police forces work more efficiently to strengthen the fight against crime while providing taxpayers with better value for money in these tough economic times', May said.

Plans include the introduction of directly-elected local police commissioners to oversee the 43 forces in England and Wales.

This will mark the end of traditional police authorities, which are generally overseen by local councillors. Under the new plan, directly elected police commissioners will be elected from 2012 and will have oversight of local police budgets. The commissioners will also hire future chief constables.

The Home Secretary says that these changes will make policing more accountable to the electorate.

'On a local level, it will put local people at the heart of policing by giving them the power to elect Police and Crime Commissioners,' May said.

Burden of bureaucracy

Changes include the ditching the Serious Organised Crime Agency (SOCA) and replacing it with an FBI style national body. This decision comes just four years after

SOCA was launched and has come as a shock to many in the force. However SOCA has been found to be ineffective with reports indicating that for every £15 of public money spent last year, it recovered just £1 from criminals.

The Home Office minister has also set out plans for a new National Crime Agency (NCA). The NCA will take up much of the work of SOCA as well as other units including the Child Exploitation and Online Protection (CEOP) Centre and the National Policing Improvement Agency (NPIA).

The strategy also sets out how the Government will tackle the bureaucratic burden on police officers by returning more responsibility to the police to charge in minor offences, scrapping unnecessary paperwork like the 'stop' form, and abolishing central targets.

'It is vital that police officers are free to tackle the crime and antisocial behaviour that matters most to people, not tied-down by bureaucracy and form-filling. The fundamental reforms we are announcing today continue our work to deliver a police service that is visible and accountable to the very people it serves in communities up and down the country,' Prime Minister David Cameron said.

Scrapping stop and search forms a retrograde step

While welcoming the rolling back of bureaucracy and the phasing costly quango's, equalities groups have warned against the PM's decision to scrap stop forms.

They point out that eliminating the data on stop and search and reducing the data that is captured through these police practices will make it impossible to monitor how the police use this power.

Recent Ministry of Justice figures show that the number of black people stopped and searched has increased by more than 70 % in the last five years even though this group have lower lifetime offending rates than their white counterparts.

'The unmonitored and unsupervised use of stop and search power will increase mistrust and further alienate the communities who targeted by this police power.

This new coalition government has an opportunity restore police community relations which the former Government destroyed their policies on DNA and stop and search. They should not shy away from tackling police discrimination. Bad policing not only erodes community cohesion but is a burden to the public purse,' a community activist told Black Mental Health UK.

European Court of Human Rights ruled against stop and search powers

Earlier this year the European Court of Human Rights ruled in the case of Gillen and Quinton v. United Kingdom that the extent to which police officers used stop and search powers under section 44 interfered with the right to private life.

The court was especially concerned about the impact of these powers on Britain's black communities, in particular young men from African Caribbean communities.

Community leaders are clear that the stop and search forms must stay if the discriminatory way minority communities are policed is to be properly monitored so that it can be addressed.

'Form-filling

is not a waste of time. It keeps the police accountable and ensures they do not take liberties with our liberties,' the mother of one young man who is a model pupil who has repeatedly been stopped and searched on his way home from school told Black Mental Health UK.

The consultation paper, 'Policing in the 21st Century: reconnecting police and the people', contains proposals for ways to make police in England and Wales more available and responsive, more accountable, more effective, and deliver better value for money.

The public consultation will run until 20 September 2010 and a number of the proposed changes will feature in the Police Reform and Social Responsibility Bill, which will be published in the autumn.