

CUMBRIA POLICE AUTHORITY

25 July 2006
Agenda Item

POLICE FORCE STRUCTURES

Report by the Chief Constable

1. SUMMARY

This report sets out the Chief Constable's professional advice following postponement of work towards the proposed amalgamation between Cumbria and Lancashire Constabularies.

2. RECOMMENDATION

That the Chief Constable's revised professional advice is used to inform decision making.

Whilst amalgamation with Lancashire Constabulary provides the best practical policing solution to address the protective services capability gap in Cumbria the necessary financial environment to do so is not now achievable.

The Home Office announcement that government council tax policy will not change would result in a significant financial gap, both cumulative and year on year, which would mean the costs would be greater than any benefit derived.

There is no longer a business case to support voluntary amalgamation.

However, to do nothing is not an option. The Constabulary is now working to identify and assess options to generate efficiencies that meet both financial pressures and the protective services capability gap.

3. DETAIL

3.1 Background

3.1.1 Her Majesty's Inspector of Constabulary (HMIC) published Closing the Gap on 16th September 2005. HMIC concluded that the "current 43 force structure is no longer fit for purpose" and that "in the interests of the efficiency and effectiveness of policing it should change". The Home Secretary strongly agreed with HMIC's conclusions and on 19 September 2005 required Chief Officers and Chairs of Police Authorities to provide an option evaluation and business case by 23rd December 2005.

3.1.2 The Constabulary and Police Authority worked together to identify and assess options. On 15th December 2005 the Constabulary presented a detailed business case to the Police Authority, based on which the Chief Constable recommended:

- a. While there is a strong desire to retain Cumbria Constabulary as it stands, this is not feasible.
- b. There is no overwhelming case to distinguished between two amalgamation options:
 - Cumbria and Lancashire
 - Cumbria, Lancashire and Merseyside.
- c. Any final decision to pursue an amalgamation would ideally be supported by the following additional information:
 - Detailed design of the merged force with greater cost appraisal
 - In depth forecasting of the future protective services environment
 - Funding streams
 - Police Authority structures
 - Precept harmonisation
 - National scheme to manage staff changes.

3.1.3 The Chief Constable submitted the business case to the Home Office. The business cases submitted by forces in each region were scrutinised by the Home Office and HMIC. On the 6th February the Home Secretary advised North West forces that he considered the only practical option for the region was amalgamation of Cumbria and Lancashire, amalgamation of Merseyside and Cheshire, with Greater Manchester Police remaining stand-alone. The Home Secretary asked that by 24 February 2006 Authorities in the North West determine whether they were prepared to undertake voluntary amalgamations.

3.1.4 On 24 February 2006 the Chief Constable advised that, based on the analysis in the business case and assurances received from the Home Office, pursuing amalgamation with Lancashire was in the best interests of policing in Cumbria. Cumbria Police Authority and Lancashire Police Authority agreed to volunteer to amalgamate, subject to several reassurances being provided.

3.1.5 Since March 2006, Cumbria and Lancashire Police Authorities and Constabularies have worked jointly with the Home Office to resolve the conditions for volunteering to amalgamate. On 26 April Cumbria Police Authority was updated that the assurances were not yet complete. The Home Office later requested more time to address the outstanding issues and the Authority meeting of 10 May was postponed.

3.1.6 On 19 June the Home Secretary announced that he hoped to lay a voluntary amalgamation order for Cumbria and Lancashire before Parliament rose for the summer recess, to take effect on 1 April 2007.

3.1.7 On 28 June the Chief Constable advised that amalgamation with Lancashire remained the best available option to address the protective services gap in Cumbria. However, any final decision should be informed by a complete and satisfactory set of information. In particular, firm details of the precept harmonisation scheme were needed, to confirm there are no hidden costs of amalgamating and no uncertainty about the expected benefits.

3.1.8 On 10 July 2006 the Home Office confirmed that government was not prepared to change council tax policy and it would not be in a position to resolve the issue of

council tax harmonisation to the satisfaction of the constabularies and authorities. Both Chairs and Chief Constables announced that the voluntary amalgamation would no longer proceed, subject to approval at Police Authority meetings.

3.2 Prospects for Voluntary Amalgamation

- 3.2.1 Cumbria and Lancashire Constabularies have been consistent in recommending that voluntary amalgamation in April 2007 is the most effective available solution to closing the gap in protective services in the two counties. Joint work towards the proposed amalgamation was proceeding well and had confirmed that the agenda to April 2007 would be challenging but achievable. The Home Office had, until very recently, also demonstrated a strong commitment to this amalgamation, in terms of practical and financial support. Between March and June 2006 most of the information needed for a final decision on amalgamation had been addressed, with the important exception of council tax precept harmonisation.
- 3.2.2 The business case for amalgamation recommended that information about precept harmonisation be considered before any final decision was made. Despite earlier Home Office confidence that a mutually acceptable solution was achievable, this has not been the case. The government would require a strategic constabulary to harmonise council tax in a way causing significant and permanent loss of funding for policing in Cumbria and Lancashire. This would seriously threaten the new strategic constabulary's ability to invest in protective services. In these circumstances, the case for voluntary amalgamation is no longer valid.
- 3.2.3 The government has announced that while police mergers are "not off the agenda", it would not be "sensible" to force them on the police service.

3.3 Next Steps

- 3.3.1 Local policing realities are unchanged. Cumbria Constabulary is a small constabulary with strong and stable performance, and an excellent relationship with our community. However, policing is becoming more complicated and difficult, for example:
- Organised crime gangs are spreading and becoming more sophisticated.
 - The threat from terrorism has increased.
 - There are new types of crime, using the internet and new technology.
- There is strong evidence that such problems will grow in Cumbria over the next few years. We need to tackle these new challenges by improving protective services, but without damaging our existing local policing. This could include investment in:
- Serious and organised crime
 - Major crime
 - Counter terrorism
 - Major disaster
 - Critical incidents
 - Public order
 - Road policing.
- The Constabulary is facing a worsening financial picture. No new grant funding is available, nor is there an option to significantly increase funding via local council tax

precept. The Constabulary has already significantly improved its efficiency over the last few years. It must however take radical steps to further improve its use of resources.

- 3.3.2 The government is consulting and considering new proposals for protective services, but no solutions will be available until the autumn, at the earliest. The Constabulary has already begun to use the work produced to support amalgamation to re – examine what can be done by Cumbria alone. There is likely to be a need to significantly reconfigure some policing activities and functions to provide the necessary efficiency and to not only meet financial pressures but to also identify re investment in improving protective service capability. These challenges will form a key aspect of revised budgetary forecasts and strategic planning over the next three years. The time scale however is now critical and the work must be completed no later than March 2007 to produce the necessary plans.

Michael Baxter
Chief Constable