

# In the shadows?

**The role of police authorities is a mystery to many people yet they can play a crucial role in ensuring the effectiveness and efficiency of local police. Floyd Millen examines their role.**

 Police authorities are increasingly coming under the spotlight as politicians discuss the best way for local people to make decisions about local policing priorities. But, are police authorities able to create increased participation in making decisions about local policing?

There are those, such as the Conservative Party, who might argue that police authorities are ineffective, but there are an even greater number of people who are unaware that this institution exists. For those who are aware of their existence, they are unaware of their role, let alone the location of their authority.

A report carried out for the Home Office entitled *The role of police authorities in public engagement*, published in April 2003, found that the public had little or no knowledge about police authorities and the work they do. Out of fourteen focus groups across England and Wales, the majority of those involved did not know what a police authority was and what they did.

With such little interest or knowledge, how can police authorities underscore and support active citizenship, while addressing and balancing the very real issues of policing? In the heady realm of rights, responsibilities the role of the citizen and the state, what is the added value that this particular institution brings to our everyday life?

The police authority is an

independent body made up of local people. There is a police authority for each of the 43 police forces in England and Wales with the only national police authority being the British Transport Police Authority (BTPA). The duty of the police authority, amongst other things, is to set the strategic direction for the local police force whilst holding the chief constable to account on behalf of the local community for the policing service delivered.

## Scrutiny

Police authorities have a general role of scrutiny. To date, much research and discussion has been focused on whom police authorities scrutinise, rather than any meaningful assessment of what they do and how it fits into the 'bigger picture' of influence, involvement and control. It is important that we understand how this additional layer of institution enables the public to feel a sense of control and involvement over the delivery and management of their policing service on an operational level. As expressed by Bayley (1991), law enforcement is the most visibly coercive tool of the state and as the public we give our authority and tacit consent in the hope that our way of life and assets are protected.

But can police authorities be effective if those who they are there to support and work on behalf of are unaware that they



even exist? Secondly, to the uninitiated there is no connection between a strategic authority and an operational authority - as one is seen as a managerial talking shop whilst the other gets on with the tangible job of securing our streets. If this is the case, have we simply created another unnecessary level of bureaucracy, and would it have been more productive and effective if 'citizens', through forums and other committee structures, directly brought the police to account?

People generally look at democracy and how its institutions perform in relation to it. A number of reports, including the report of the Sheehy Committee 1993, the Scarman report and its recommendations for consultation through Community Police Consultative Groups (CPCG), the Stephen Lawrence inquiry report as well as the publishing of local policing plans and many others, have to some degree ensured an increased possibility of involvement and accountability of the police service to the public.

### Accountability

But, who defines the scope of accountability, who sets the parameters for judging performance? Surely accountability ought to be more than a responsibility or commitment to explain. Accountability is about answering in relation to delegated powers or functions. It is the possibility that these powers and responsibilities can be revoked if necessary and is linked to obligation and the responsibility of all parties to source representation and participation.

There is a strong and ever-growing feeling that within the tripartite of Home Secretary, chief constables and police authority that police authorities have little real control or power and are unable to effectively bring chief constables and their police services to account and are subject to the political exigencies of the time. This has been reflected in a number of notable cases like the recent Bichard inquiry report where the Humberside Police and its chief constable, Mr David Westwood, were in open disagreement with the former

Home Secretary David Blunkett. Today we have the current merger standoff between the Home Secretary Charles Clarke and police authorities following HM Inspectorate of Constabulary's *Closing the Gap* report which again is testing that relationship.

Regardless of the merits of the proposed merger, the role and influence of police authorities is for many unclear. It would appear that they are primarily bureaucratic institutions having a procedural and process relevance but in reality having little ability to alter or define key issues that directly impact on policing in their locality. What we do know however is that when the public

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are informed about the authority and its role they are satisfied that the police are scrutinised by an independent body (Audit Commission: 2002, 9). In *Policing after the Act* (1997) Jones and Newburn's research found that police authority clerks expressed that as a result of the Police and Magistrates Courts Act 1994 they were operating in a more business like way. The researchers found that the introduction of policing plans required increased monitoring on a local basis, as a result police authorities were increasing preoccupied and

focussed on managerial and organisational issues rather than the strategic policy issues governing local policing.

### People power

Police authorities, in partnership with police, have a responsibility to create and sustain an environment of trust, confidence and transparency. What has been attempted is to create a system of policing for the people by the people. Scarman echoed that the police were members of the community themselves and could only operate with consent and support.

It is however, not that police authorities could benefit from an increase in powers that limit its effectiveness as a mechanism of democratic accountability. There is the perception that police authority members have "strong pro-police orientations". Jones et al (1994) maintained that police authorities undervalue themselves and are unaware of their real powers.

Police authorities play a significant role, however, even amongst the rank and file police very little is actually known about them or what it is they do. Knowledge of the existence of police authorities within the wider society is crucial if the authority is to be effective and have the credibility required to undertake its role. The call for greater accountability dictates that the institutional mechanisms set up to bring about that accountability has a) sufficient expertise and knowledge, b) is autonomous of all influence and c) has the resource capability to deliver.

Over the years police authorities have come in for criticism as not being sufficiently versed in the workings of the police service, in particular authority members have been labelled as inexperienced and out of touch whilst others have been seen as too much in touch and sympathetic to the police's agenda. Whatever the true picture is, it is clear that a vital role of members feeding back to their constituents is lacking and that the wider public has no knowledge of this potentially important institution.

True accountability is just as much about knowing the questions that need to be asked, ensuring that within the system there is sufficient information, checks and balances. There needs to be a wider understanding of the strategic areas of controls, the varied levels of accountability, the mechanisms for halting or changing a course of action. It is incumbent on police authorities and the Association of Police Authorities (APA) in particular to up its game and begin to actively increase the profile of itself and its members to a wider constituency otherwise police authorities as we know them may become another extinct species.

● Floyd Millen is currently reading a PhD on the role and effectiveness of police authorities at Loughborough University.



### What is a police authority?

- A police authority is an independent body made up of local people
- The police authority's job is to make sure that the public have an efficient and effective local police force
- There is a police authority for each local police force
- All police authorities are members of the Association of Police Authorities

### Who is on the police authority?

Most police authorities have 17 members:

- Nine local councillors appointed by the local council
- Five independent members selected following local advertisements
- Three magistrates from the local area
- The Metropolitan Police Authority has 23 members because they represent the capital city which is bigger in size
- 9.2 per cent of all police authority members are from minority ethnic backgrounds and just under 30 per cent are women