

Home Affairs Select Committee Report on Police and Crime Commissioners: Response from the Centre for Public Scrutiny



The Centre for Public Scrutiny has today (7 May 2014) issued this statement in response to the publication of the Home Affairs Select Committee report on Police and Crime Commissioners.

The Centre for Public Scrutiny provided written and oral evidence to the Home Affairs Select Committee's inquiry into Police and Crime Commissioners. We are pleased to see that many of the comments we made have been referred to in the report. Over the course of the next few weeks we plan to talk to others about how we might work towards implementing the Committee's recommendations.

Lack of clarity about Panels' role

We share the concerns of both the LGA and the Committee about the lack of clarity around Panels' role and are pleased that the Committee endorsed our central call for more clarity to be provided by the Home Office. Disagreements between Panels and PCCs on this fundamental point have not been widespread, but where they have occurred they have presented significant logjams. The Committee identified that many Panel members are former Police Authority members, and suggested that this had led to some of the confusion. We agree that this is a factor, but it is one of a number of issues which together have combined to hinder the relationship in a number of areas.

Need for more transparency

We strongly welcome the calls for increased transparency – in particular the requirements for the production of forward plans and consistency over decisions of sufficient significance to justify formal publication. This will significantly help Panels to carry out constructive, proactive scrutiny. It is for the LGA and the APCC to decide whether a protocol between them is the best way to define how information between Panels and PCCs should be shared. The view that we have expressed in the past is that Panels and PCCs should do this individually, in order to take account of local circumstances and bring about more constructive, locally-led discussions on areas of policy and practice. However, we do recognise the benefits of national consistency. We also note and welcome the Committee's comments on the need for clarity around the precept-setting process.

Panels must add value to appointments process

We welcome the calls for clarity around the work of deputy commissioners, but remain concerned that without consistency around the mechanism for the appointment of such people, effective confirmation hearings for their posts will remain difficult to carry out. We further welcome the proposals for additional scrutiny of instances where Chief Constables are proposed to be dismissed, but again highlight the difficulty of carrying this out effectively without more support. If the Home Office proposes to increase Panels' powers in these areas (or in

relation to confirmation hearings more generally) we consider that more work will need to be done with PCCs and chief constable (and their representative bodies) to ensure that any scrutiny carried out by Panels will add value to the appointment or dismissal process.

Improve relationships

We agree with the Committee that many Panels have struggled to define and carry out their role, but would stress that this is as much down to the relationships between Panels and PCCs as to any deficit with Panels themselves. We agree that sharing best practice will help but we believe that it is possible to go further. We are planning to speak to some of our partners about exactly what further support we might provide nationally, and how Panels can be supported to work together more effectively.

Political proportionality issues

The Committee has made comments on the political proportionality of Panels – our research suggested that in a minority of instances, chairs (and the majority of Panel members) being of the same party as the PCC has the potential to dilute the robustness of the scrutiny process. In practice however there was little evidence of this fact alone having had a negative impact on the scrutiny process. A cross-party approach to Panel work is obviously beneficial but we are not sure that mandating that the Chair and Vice-Chair of the Panel be from different parties (where the Chair is of the same party as the PCC) would be a proportionate way of achieving this.

Costs

On cost, we agree with the need for a proper assessment of the actual cost of supporting Panels. If the Home Office and/or the LGA wish to carry out this research, we would be keen to work on it with them. We would also be keen to contribute to any research on complaints handling.

Conclusion

This is an important report into the major reform of policing accountability represented by Police and Crime Commissioners, and we are pleased that our contribution to increasing understanding one particular aspect of the reform – the role of Police and Crime Panels – has been recognised and many of our suggestions endorsed by the Committee.

For more information, please contact Ed Hammond on ed.hammond@cfps.org.uk or 020 7187 7369