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This article, 'It's about policing not police numbers'  
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appeared in the April '08 edition of Public Servant –  
The Publication for Today's Public Service Leaders.

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## New policing

Too important to be left to police alone, says Flanagan

● pages 14-29

### NEWS

**MINISTERS IMPEDING PROGRESS ON EQUALITY**

- O'Donnell develops training to improve ministerial skills and attitudes...page 5
- MPs demand proof of £17bn bureaucracy savings...page 5
- Nice new station, shame about the train service...page 6



### COMMENT page 13

#### Darling's gamble

Professor Colin Talbot on the real scandal of the new Chancellor's first budget

### FEATURES page 32

#### Scientific approach

Public Service Events' SciTech 08 summit assesses the state of UK investment in science and technology

### FEATURES page 47

#### History lesson

Preserving the nation's heritage is central to regeneration and a sense of community, says Dame Liz Forgan

### FEATURES page 60

#### Scots powerhouse?

Scotland has the resources to become a leader in renewable energy – if it makes the right market moves

### FEATURES page 65

#### Gender gap battle

Organisations are proving slow to wake up to the business case for equality, the NSG women's conference hears

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# It's about policing not police numbers

Sir Ronnie Flanagan, the Home Secretary's senior policing adviser, sets out his vision – for modernising policing in partnership, for future funding, boycotting bureaucracy and for a refocus on the neighbourhood. He talks candidly to Lynda King Taylor

**W**hen you meet Sir Ronnie Flanagan, HM Chief Inspector of Constabulary and the Home Secretary's senior adviser on policing since 2005, you meet a soul of steel. A front-row force to be reckoned with – he played and coached rugby at senior level – rather more obviously than the Yeats' poetry-lover.

An objective yet at times obdurate officer, he responded to the ombudsman's castigation of his Royal Ulster Constabulary inquiry into the Omagh bombing by saying he would "publicly commit suicide" if she was proved right. He left office as Northern Ireland's chief constable in 2002, embattled and accused of an unreasonable loyalty to his officers.

He is alive, kicking, and dusting himself down after emerging from skirmishes over his recent Review of Policing that looks to step up police performance by managing risk. It offers a major culture change for policing in England and Wales, standardising the way police work, sweeping away a tradition of each force choosing its own way, but nothing, he insists, that "threatens in any way the critical importance of the traditional role of the constable".

It proposes a new model in which the service directs resources specifically to areas that will have the biggest impact on reducing harm to communities. An opportunity, he says "to alter the course of

how we deliver policing. We can free up valuable police time and transform the working environment of individual officers. But this has to be in the service of public protection".

Too many police have been "straightjacketed by process" when they need to be engaging in the issues that affect people outside their own front door. "Serious and organised crime and street crime are not mutually exclusive – there is a golden thread. Criminals and terrorists come from neighbourhoods," says Sir Ronnie, whose experience beyond Northern Ireland, as an FBI academy graduate and an observer of US, European and Iraqi policing, gives him a special vantage point.

He insists there must be avoidance of increasing community cohesion becoming too political. He asks questions about what policing must look like through the eyes of the citizen and sees community partnership as essential. Policing is "much too important and impactful on all our lives to be left to the police alone," he says. "It is truly effective only when it involves police partnerships with all the communities they serve . . . as public servants it is beholden on police to listen to the different demands, discern differing needs, expectations and work together to address that."

Society has become too risk averse, and, he says "without being reckless let's be risk conscious –

for example in areas such as 'stop and account'. Why not have it recorded via use of Airwave (digital radio network) rather than have officers consume time recording foot-length forms? The administrative load on a frontline officer today gave me a shock when I was out in the West Midlands", researching for his review.

"Have the right boxes been ticked?" asks Flanagan, reacting to the volume of unproductive administration. Home Secretary Jacqui Smith says the government is determined to cut unnecessary red tape and to free police officers to focus on protecting the community. Administration and IT systems will be streamlined. One hopes this can be achieved without resorting to yet another bureaucracy task force.

Flanagan sees scope for releasing "up to seven million hours of police time every year, the equivalent of 3,500 officers". He draws an analogy between cholesterol and bureaucracy. "There's good and bad," he says, "and necessary audit trails, particularly in areas such as domestic violence . . . for instance, to ensure what is serious assault today does not become a murder three months down the line".

What has to be eliminated is the bad cholesterol that clogs policing's arteries. "Sometimes it has been imposed, other times we have imposed it on ourselves as we have become so risk averse that



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**FLANAGAN: policing is much too important and impactful on all our lives to be left to the police alone**

we want to record absolutely everything, just in case there is a subsequent question...without asking what is the real value of such an approach.”

The level of public fear over personal safety has been rising in recent years, not just in inner cities but increasingly in rural areas where police are never seen. This concern was not mollified by Flanagan’s review comment that spending constraints would mean reduced officer numbers in future. “The current number of police officers in England and Wales is unsustainable,” he said. It was not necessary to have 140,000 officers, he felt, when many jobs could be done better by civilians. “There is widespread recognition among the leadership of the service that maintaining police numbers at their current level is not sustainable over the course of the next three years,” he said in his review.

With alarm bells going off in headquarters up and down the land, Flanagan has sought to rationalise a message he feels has been distorted in the retelling – “let’s concentrate on policing, not the police or police numbers . . . that is no attack whatsoever on the critical importance of the traditional role of the constable; quite the opposite,” he says. And on this there seems no ambiguity.

“The growth of police numbers year on year has been very welcome and has been very necessary, but I think the financial reality is which ever party

might be in power it is just not going to happen or go on. My view is if we free police from the burden of bureaucracy – and I have discussed this with a relatively conservative estimate – the possibility is we could free the equivalent of 2-3,000 officers per year to more frontline duty.”

The crime fighting fund, as with many initiatives, may have the best of motives but sometimes there are unintended outcomes. “Sometimes the unintended effect was, rather than risk losing that funding stream, some forces felt the need to deploy police officers on duties that were anything but frontline with an entirely perverse effect to that which was intended.”

“Government must move to free people from constraining rules surrounding the crime fighting fund,” he adds. “What I am simply saying is the reality of life that we should not slavishly hold to police numbers. They will not be continually increased. In my view operationally they need not be.”

The allocation of grant funding to police authorities, he says, should be based transparently “on objective need, in order to better match resources to threat and demand”. In the longer term, the Home Office should seek agreement with the Association of Chief Police Officers (ACPO) and the Association of Police Authorities (APA) on a revision to the funding formula that better deals

with the shifting demands of protective services.

Critics want to see new funding now, though the last formula review took place only three years ago. “I took a pragmatic view. It is very difficult to do it now,” says Sir Ronnie. “The problems are historical. Some police authorities ended up generously funded, free from debt, with good estate. Others ended up with sub-standard policing estate. With a comprehensive spending review now set for three years it is impractical to think it can all be sorted out now – but it must be corrected in future spending rounds.”

Government must engage fully in the crucial next phase of modernising policing, with a full range of departments working progressively in partnership. Centrally set targets that restrict local services, the constraints of funding, the drivers of bureaucracy and issues over accountability will need to be confronted.

“Over the past 25 years,” says Sir Ronnie, “our service has been transformed with many changes, but in improving the service we have also become process bound. We must strive for a police service that has flexibility and support to act with their own professional discretion.” The Flanagan review has potential to refocus policing. An imminent Home Office green paper will reveal more about how effective that focus may be.



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