Reviews

Police Force Reorganisation: Getting It Right

by Jonathan Nicholls

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Reviewed by Donald Cronin

Police forces throughout the United Kingdom have, over recent years, undergone various degrees of reorganisation. The officers within those police forces reading this book will no doubt recognise many of the discussion points and reflect on how this publication would have assisted them in their force reorganisation.

Although the Audit Commission, Home Office and Her Majesty's Inspectorate of Constabulary have encouraged the police service to undertake reorganisation they have not provided a best practice model of force structure or basic command unit (BCU). There has been, to date, little advice on the optimum level of devolution or advice on reorganising. This publication is, therefore, the first publication discussing the difficulties and options to be considered when planning such a reorganisation.

Nicholls graphically identifies the confusion that exists within the police service on how to conduct a force reorganisation. Such lack of information and direction demonstrates the need for this publication; it is an ideal aide-mémoire for all police officers and civilians involved in the planning of a force reorganisation.

In the preparation of this book Nicholls carried out wide-ranging research with police forces throughout England and Wales, and has attempted to identify best practice and the pitfalls in reorganisation. He states that it is 'aimed to draw together, organise and present a wide range of the issues that will face a force as it plans and implements a programme of change'. This statement underscores the main purpose of this book, and accordingly, it does not purport to be an academic text.

Having discussed the usefulness of this publication it is pertinent to highlight areas which can lead the reader to underestimate the difficulty in bringing about change. Some changes are notoriously difficult and take considerable time to achieve.

The section dealing with changing culture is an example where the reader is left with the impression that by making a number of changes, such as the recruiting criteria and moving from a 'blaming' management style to a learning style, then the force culture will change. But changing culture against a background of a blaming management style that has been in existence probably for many years is notoriously difficult.

Even though the style of management may change, much of the work of the front-line constable remains, which previous research has demonstrated helps to form the culture. As a consequence, change of culture is difficult and slow to achieve.

Chief officers set the culture of a force and Nicholls rightly highlights this aspect when he describes the tension found between chief officers (COs) on reaching agreement on reorganisation. He goes on to emphasise the requirement for COs to agree and understand the reasons for reorganisation. Without that agreement the force will receive mixed messages on any planned reorganisation.

The chapter on devolution is comprehensive and discusses the advantages and disadvantages of moving from centralised command to basic command units, with devolved budgets and decision making. It will provide a reorganisation team with valuable assistance, but perhaps the importance of this chapter is that it highlights the resulting power-shift as chief officers relinquish much of their base of central command.

Nicholls discusses in some detail the difficulties that arise when a BCU commander misuses the devolution of budgets and decision making, but appears to fail to understand the chief officers' ultimate authority and ability to remove such officers.

The section dealing with the process of review and reorganisation discusses in brief detail a large number of aspects. However, it leaves the reader with many ideas but with little detail on how to actually carry out the reorganisation or evaluation.

In summary this publication is a useful reference book of issues affecting police reorganisation. It does not proclaim to be an academic text but, in advising the police service on getting reorganisation right it would have benefited from a discussion of recognised models of decision making and risk assessment, which would assist in planning.

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