

The IPCC should be scrapped, says former Met Police Commissioner Lord Stevens

The Independent Police Complaints Commission (IPCC) should be replaced with a new body that can hold the police to account when something goes wrong, says the former Commissioner of the Metropolitan Police, Lord Stevens



The IPCC should be scrapped, says former Met Police commissioner Lord Stevens Photo: ALAMY

By Lord Stevens of Kirkwhelpington

11:56PM GMT 10 Feb 2013

Sir Robert Peel introduced the new police of the metropolis in 1829 and they were a radical reform of the old watch. Much of value from those reforms still remains – our tradition of unarmed policing by consent, bobbies on the beat, high international standards. But other aspects of policing culture and performance need significant reform to keep with a changing society and new challenges.

When Yvette Cooper asked me to head up a Commission to inquire into the future of policing last year, it became clear one of our central themes would be improving police standards. That requires professionalising and motivating officers and staff and a stronger framework of standards and accountability. But piecemeal, fragmented reforms won't cut it. We need a positive vision of policing and reforms which put the public at the heart of policing.

In many areas British policing is very strong. Crime has fallen by nearly 50 per cent in recent decades. We have an international reputation to be proud of, with officers from across Europe coming to be trained and see the world class investigative techniques we use. Daily police officers lay their own lives on the line to protect the public as we saw tragically in Greater Manchester last year. Neighbourhood policing which I worked to introduce in London in 2004 has had a powerful impact across the country. Confidence in policing rose as a consequence. And the country enjoyed the summer Olympics and the Jubilee celebrations underpinned by a huge security effort. Perhaps policing at its best.

But policing also faces significant problems. Despite falling crime figures nearly 4,000,000 offences recorded by the police in 2011/12 and we only managed to detect 27%. The detection rate has fallen in the last two years. There is great variation in the likelihood of different crimes being detected by different forces, and a postcode lottery in support for victims. Complaints of incivility against police officers vary, so two adjacent forces Northumbria and Cumbria have the highest and lowest complaint rate.

During the year that the Commission has been sitting, revelations of police misconduct and investigative failures – from hacking to Hillsborough or undercover policing – have been very damaging to public confidence. The Independent Police Complaints Commission is considered by the public and MPs to be failing in its mission to guard the integrity of the police service.

So the Commission is looking at how to improve policing standards across the board. Gimmicks won't work. Nor will ratcheting up regulation without a long term vision for policing. The public must be placed squarely at the heart of policing and police performance culture.

Developing and valuing the professionalism of officers in staff is crucial. The Commission's survey of over 23,000 police officers and police staff found that better support for staff – including things like allowing staff an input into decision-making processes, ensuring a fair culture, or tackling internal bullying – also improved performance. The survey found a direct relationship between officers' sense of being valued within the force and the number of external complaints against the police. The better the morale and motivation among officers, the better the policing and the better the response from the public.

Yet currently morale is extremely low. Our research found that over half of officers and forty per cent of police staff say they are considering leaving policing. In three forces that rose to over 70%. Staff responses show them to be worried, uncertain, anxious about the Service and generally unsettled and unsupported by the Government.

The newly established College of Policing has huge potential. It must become a centre for

excellence. More needs to be done as well to raise the professional qualifications of staff – both new recruits and existing officers and staff – and maintain their competencies throughout their professional careers. Internal cultural problems that can hold talented officers back must be tackled, with much more action to promote diversity too.

There should also be stronger safeguards. It should not only be chief constables who are held to account but all those who work for the service – officers, support staff and private sector staff should be individually responsible for the quality of their work. It is doubtful whether the IPCC has at present either the resources or capacity to undertake competency or conduct investigations. But it is not enough to simply reform or strengthen the IPCC. It needs to be replaced with a new body that can wipe the slate clean. There is duplication with HMIC and no system to learn lessons from inspections and complaints. Current arrangements for accountability – involving the IPCC, the HMIC, forces investigating themselves and each other, Police and Crime Commissioners, the Home Office – are too fragmented and confused, so no one is clear who is responsible for investigating or putting things right when something goes wrong. The Commission believes a new coherent framework of standards and accountability is badly needed.

The public and Parliament need to have confidence in policing as a force for good and a service for the public. Police officers I have talked to across the country are keen for reforms that improve the service to the public. Our Commission is working to set out reforms later this year for the New Police. But we know that delivering effective reform means working with the police not against them, to build on the best of British policing with a vision for the 21st century.