

Scots police merger 'sets example' to south of border



By James Cook
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The chief constable of Scotland's new national police service has suggested that the merger of forces could be emulated in England and Wales.

Steve House told the BBC it was unsustainable to maintain 43 separate police forces south of the border.

Mr House said: "My personal view is that structural change is inevitable down south."

Eight forces are being combined to form Police Scotland which will take over the country's policing on 1 April.

In a wide ranging interview for BBC News, Mr House also revealed that only 100 voluntary redundancies had been processed in advance of Police Scotland becoming operational.

He had previously suggested that [job cuts in the "low thousands" might be needed](#) for the new force to make the efficiency savings demanded of it.

Backfilling jobs

The Scottish government has pledged there will be no compulsory job losses at Police Scotland, but Mr House said it was proving difficult to obtain volunteers whom the force could do without in the short-term.

Mr House, who will command more than 17,000 police officers, said: "The vast majority of people who volunteer, who perhaps come from the control room, we can't let go because we would have to find a police officer off the street to take their role."

He said he agreed with a report from the public spending watchdog, Audit Scotland, that [using police officers to perform administrative roles previously carried out by civilians was not sensible](#).

"We have no policy or strategy for backfilling civilian jobs with police officers from the street," he said.

"We're looking to have the right level of integrated workforce, with the right number of police officers working with civilian colleagues."

The chief constable set out his priorities for the force, second in size only to London's Metropolitan Police, which included:

- improving the investigation of rapes
- tackling domestic violence
- reducing violent crime

Mr House said that if any police officer in Scotland could "wave a magic wand" and be granted one wish, it would be to reduce alcohol consumption.

He said this was an enormous factor in the majority of violent crimes where people were taken in to custody.

"If we could reduce alcohol consumption across the board, you would reduce violence levels dramatically - that's something we're focused on."

He said he did not know whether the Scottish government's plan to introduce a minimum price for alcohol of 50p per unit would work.

He said he had supported it on the basis that it was worth a try.

"It won't be the only answer. It will have to work with other things, but I'm for giving it a try."

Asked what he personally brought to the role of Scotland's first national chief constable, Steve House, 55, who was short-listed for the post of London's Met Commissioner in August 2011, said that despite his English accent he had been born in Glasgow where he had spent the first 12 years of his life and considered himself a Scot.

He said: "I'm not at the Met, I'm here in Scotland. I'd rather being doing the job I'm doing right now.

"I went for the job, I wanted the job, I didn't get it. You move on."

Local plans

Mr House, who will lead a team of 11 senior officers which includes only one woman, said he wanted to help more female officers reach higher rank and suggested he would be delighted if he eventually handed over command of the service to a woman.

"It would be great for me if, when I pass the role on, a woman gets the job. That would be fantastic," he said.

He also rejected suggestions that the new national force would damage local law enforcement priorities, insisting that an individual policing plan had been drawn up for each one of Scotland's 353 local council wards.

"It's a hugely locally-focused service. There is no redeployment of officers across the country.

"All 14 divisional commanders are people who came up through the ranks in that part of the country.

"It's very local and it's tuned to the local needs and requirements of each community."

But the Scottish Liberal Democrat leader, Willie Rennie said he was not convinced.

He insisted that too much power in Scotland was being concentrated in the hands of three people: the chief constable; the lord advocate who heads the Crown Office, Scotland's prosecution service; and the justice secretary in the Scottish government.

He said: "The idea that centralisation, that pulling everything into the centre, to get economies of scale - it can't necessarily save money.

"In fact, what you lose is the local leadership and the local connection.

"Actually making sure there is local policing by local consent is something we should cherish, and we should not dismiss too lightly."

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