

Give police commissioners power to increase council tax to fight crime, says think-tank

Police and crime commissioners should be given new powers to increase the council tax to fund local prisons, effectively giving voters over influence how many criminals are sent to jail, a leading think-tank has said.



The Policy Exchange study also floated the idea of charging offenders a fee to be dealt with by the courts, police or other parts of the criminal justice system. Photo: ALAMY

By David Barrett, Home Affairs Correspondent

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It also called for a significant expansion of the commissioners' role to oversee the fire and ambulance services, prisons and probation.

Policy Exchange, which first proposed the creation of the commissioners or PCCs 10 years ago, urged ministers to "change the balance of power" in the justice system and introduce more local control.

Giving PCCs the new powers would drive efficiency and make the criminal justice system more accountable, it said.

A current cap on the "police precept" added to council tax bills should be abolished, with PCCs able to charge an extra sum to pay for alcohol and drug treatment, prison places, electronic tagging

schemes and mental health care, the report said.

A £10 annual increase on the average 'Band D' property would pay for 50 prison places plus a range of other services, while a £50 increase would fund 300 places, it suggested.

The study also floated the idea of charging offenders a fee to be dealt with by the courts, police or other parts of the criminal justice system.

Max Chambers, the report's author, said: "Currently PCCs are operating with one arm tied behind their back. They must be able to hold local criminal justice agencies to account.

"Our ambition is for a system where, instead of local criminal justice leaders looking upwards and inwards to Whitehall for direction and validation, they increasingly look outwards to each other and downwards to the citizens they serve.

"It will mean cheaper, more effective justice in a system that desperately needs an injection of dynamism and it's the best way of making sure that PCCs fulfil their potential and meet the promises they made to the electorate."

The proposals are likely to be read carefully in Whitehall because Policy Exchange has been influential on Conservative policy over the last decade.

Not only was it responsible for creating PCCs, it also helped draw up policy on free schools and the "pupil premium" for disadvantaged children.

The report said PCCs should be able to approve senior managers in the criminal justice sector, such as prison governors, heads of probation and regional prison chiefs.

"The ultimate ambition for our proposals is not that PCCs become executives or 'managers' of services, but instead increasingly assume a role similar to that of a 'Minister for the local criminal justice system' – with the power to set the agenda, hold agencies within his/her purview to account for performance and enact reforms to ensure a more efficient and effective system at the local level," the study said.

"Local areas might be afforded greater ability to generate income and maximise revenue, which could be retained locally – for example,

through funds recovered via the Proceeds of Crime Act or by charging offenders for the use of courts or other elements of criminal justice or policing provision."

The first PCC election in November last year saw a turnout of just 15 per cent.

In April this year the Ann Barnes, the Kent PCC, appointed teenager Paris Brown as a “youth commissioner” but the 17 year-old was forced to resign six days later after it emerged she had posted a string of offensive messages online.

Some commissioners have been accused of political cronyism and of making inappropriate expenses claims.

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