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How to be a PCC: top tips from the frontline

We talk to six police and crime commissioners about overcoming their tough leadership challenges

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Guardian Professional, Tuesday 27 August 2013 09.50 BST



To communicate with the public, police and crime commissioners will need to cut out the jargon.
Photograph: Rex Features

It's nine months since the first 41 **police and crime commissioners** were elected, each with vastly different backgrounds and experiences to bring to the role. We spoke to six PCCs across the UK about how they have fared so far, asking them to share their tips on leadership and best practice in seven key areas.

How to engage the public: cut the jargon

After a particularly dismal voter turnout of 15% nationwide, commissioners had a job on their hands to get the public involved in local policing.

For Alun Michael, South Wales Labour commissioner, this means cutting jargon and acronyms, such as the term PCC, which "lose sympathy and support" and encouraging a revival of neighbourhood watch associations. Elsewhere, Labour commissioner for Northumbria Vera Baird QC has seven advisory groups which focus on gender, age, victims, LGBT, ethnic minority, faith and youth. "It's about clarity of message, visibility, consistency, being open and approachable," said Nick Alston, Conservative PCC for Essex.

How to control budgets: the case for centralising blue light services

A third of PCCs set budgets higher than the police authorities they replaced, a home affairs select committee **found**. But many are finding ways to cut costs – Baird has saved Northumbria £850,000 and Conservative commissioner Anthony Stansfeld has cut

nearly £600,000 from the Thames Valley budget.

"The bigger the police force, the easier it is to manage a big budget," said Stansfeld, who advocates combining control rooms and centralisation of vehicle procurement and fire and ambulance services. Greater collaboration between forces will also help smaller ones struggling with cost reductions. "Serious organised crime doesn't pay attention to constabulary boundaries", he said.

How to share power: 'a permeable membrane rather than a Berlin Wall'

The law sets down the responsibilities of the chief constable, who is in charge of operational policing, and the commissioner, who focuses on strategy and overseeing budgets. But the PCC role is ~~to be investigated~~ after controversies surrounding their power to hire and fire chief constables.

Michael said he and the South Wales chief constable have "mutual confidence in each other" and there are clear boundaries between them, but "it would be ridiculous to suggest that either of us could be uninterested in matters on the other side of the line. The line must be clear but it must be a permeable membrane rather than a Berlin Wall."

Alston's chief constable retired in April, so he was able to appoint his choice. "There's a risk of being too cosy," he said. "I tend to make sure it stays testing for both of us."

How to improve transparency: 'I gabber away and they have to shut me up'

Openness is written into the oath of office of the police and crime commissioner. Stansfeld feels PCCs seem more transparent because the public pay more attention to them than the former police authorities, while Alston said the minutes for police authority meetings were published on the website but were "impenetrable and mostly irrelevant".

"Data should not be in any way hidden. The media are used to prizing information out of an anonymous police officer. Now I gabber away and they have to shut me up."

Michael suggests making transparency is a "work in progress", and "depending on a high level of commitment on the part of leaders and effective systems which are continually examined, tested and challenged."

But Bob Jones, Labour PCC for West Midlands, said although cross-party policing and crime boards have been set up, which advise PCCs and debate all decisions in public, the new system is less transparent and in fact, he advocates ~~scrapping the PCC system~~ altogether.

How to collaborate with other PCCs: an 'exercise in herding cats'

While Michael has "found enormous value in the network of commissioners" regardless of party alliance, he said the association of police and crime commissioners has struggled to be useful and the Home Office has been slow to engage effectively with PCCs.

Sir Clive Loader, Conservative PCC for Leicestershire, is less critical. He believes the association – which supports PCCs and co-ordinates meetings with government departments – is still young, and has started to become the discussion house it should be. He sees value in sharing best practise. Baird also advises regularly sharing good practise with other commissioners. Jones, however, claims this approach has been tried been tried and became an "exercise in herding cats". "It's almost impossible to get a collective decision out commissioners," he admitted.

How to use digital media: 'don't have a ghost writer'

Given the size of each police force social media can provide a way to reach more with less. "I'm fully embracing the digital era," said Baird, who writes all her own tweets. Michael uses digital extensively, but said it is "no substitute for face-to-face contact".

"Police use of technology is crucial and hugely underdeveloped," said Alston. "We all need to get a lot more savvy as it's moving so fast. We need to be investing in sophisticated technology. These days the front line could be your front room, whether it's domestic violence or fraud. We need some skills that are a million miles away from bobbies on the beat."

How to get ahead: the future of PCCs

Commissioners' roles are still evolving - a [report published this month](#) by Policy Exchange, the thinktank which proposed the introduction of PCCs, argues that commissioners need more power to lead the way in reshaping the [criminal justice](#) system.

Providing leadership as a PCC is about "laying down foundations for the longer term," said Alston. "We need a team that can do quite difficult things. A real challenge, particularly against the backdrop of the economy."

Loader, who wants to increase public awareness of the benefits of the new system, said: "I would like to see the Great British public fall in love with police and crime commissioners."

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