The Story of the Police Authority

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Background history

A full-time police organisation was proposed in the aftermath of the Gordon riots of 1785 when Pitt introduced his Police Bill - a Bill primarily driven by concerns about disorder rather than crime. The Bill failed to gain assent because of opposition to potential costs and fears of a repressive system of policing. A decade later, Patrick Colquhoun, a London magistrate, sought to persuade those opposed to the idea of a police force by conducting an evaluation of the potential effectiveness of preventative policing. Colquhoun's Treatise on the Police of the Metropolis (1797) estimated that a full-time salaried force of police operating in the docklands of London would pay for itself by reducing theft from cargoes. It resulted in the creation of the Thames River Police in 1798. Colquhoun's experiment was given further credence when, in the early 1800s, a number of local authorities successfully experimented with employing full-time watchmen under their city or borough improvement acts.

In the early 1800s the main London employers were the Bow Street Courts and the Thames River Police. However, compared to today's police, they were more of a cross between security guards and bounty hunters. The Metropolitan Policing Act 1829 introduced by Sir Robert Peel, the Home Secretary, was the culmination of an humanitarian legislative programme by which he reformed the criminal law, reduced the overall number of capital offences from 221 to 10, and introduced a full-time police force to ensure that the new laws were impartially and effectively enforced. Peel shrewdly managed the debate by placating any opposition from the City of London by excluding it from the jurisdiction of the proposed Metropolitan police force. He reduced opposition from the magistrature by placing them in managerial control of the force. He, finally persuaded Parliament to place the Metropolitan Police Bill before the same Select Committee that had recommended its creation, thus ensuring that the Bill received a sympathetic hearing.

Historically, the police in England and Wales were accountable to the Justices of Peace. When recognisable forces were established in the boroughs and counties, the existing borough councils were able to take on the new policing responsibility.
and elected members formed the Watch Committees. However, county councils were not created until the passing of the Local Government Act 1888, and so the JPs took on the responsibility for the rural areas. When the elected county councils were created, the JPs were reluctant to surrender their influence and control so, as a compromise, county forces after 1888 were run by a standing joint committee of county councillors and JPs. That standing joint committee continued for 76 years.

The Royal Commission's report underpinned the Police Act 1964, which still determines the structure of the police service today, although it was consolidated by the Police Act 1996. The 1964 Act dealt with the organisation of police forces and replaced the old borough and county police authorities, the standing joint and watch committees, with police authorities whose composition included two-thirds elected representatives and one-third magistrates. The powers of the new police authorities were far inferior to those of their predecessors, particularly in the boroughs, where the watch committees used to exercise considerable control over their forces. The 1964 Act placed a duty upon the police authority to maintain an efficient police force for its area, but gave the authority no operational powers over the force. Whilst the police authority did retain a responsibility for appointing the senior officers from a Home Office approved shortlist and also retained a power to force their Chief Constable to retire in the interests of efficiency, both powers also required the approval of the Home Secretary. The Act also gave the police authority the power to request a report, separate from the Chief Constable's Annual Report, on matters relating to policing in their area. However, it gave the Chief Constable the right to refuse such a request if he or she believed that disclosure of the information was not in the public interest. In this way, the Chief Constable effectively became the guardian of the public's interests. In cases of stalemate between a police authority and a Chief Constable, the Home Secretary made the final decision.

The Police and Magistrates' Court Act 1994 has been the most influential engine of recent change to the police structure. It enabled police authorities to levy their own precepts, without reference to county councils. It also restructured police authorities by almost halving their size and by introducing lay representatives who are appointed locally from a Home Office approved shortlist.

**The Standing Joint Committee in Essex**

From 1889 to 1964 the Police Force in Essex was run by a joint committee of county councillors and JPs. Its full title was the Standing Joint Committee of the Court of Quarter Sessions and County Council.

The early records of the Joint Committee show that the world was very different in those days. When the Joint Committee agreed on 31 May 1889 that repairs should be carried out at 13 police stations, the total cost was £159. When they agreed pay scales on 2 September 1914, the weekly pay of a newly appointed constable was £1 3s 4d. On 3 September 1919 they agreed that the Chief Constable's pay should be £900.

The Joint Committee was established before the age of the motor car. At their very first meeting, on 3 May 1889, the Chief Constable Captain Showers reported that he had purchased a horse for £40. On 6 March 1890 he reported that the floor of the stable at Brentwood Police Station had a sharp incline, causing serious accidents to the horses - the Joint Committee agreed that the slope should be altered at an estimated cost of £5. On 1 December 1909 the Joint Committee agreed that the Chief Constable could hire a car for police purposes, and on 13 May 1915 they agreed that he could engage a chauffeur. On 4 September 1918 they were told that the annual running cost of a police car used in Braintree had amounted to £68, whereas "the cost of a county horse for the same period would have been £62". On 3 September 1919 they agreed that superintendents should have cars rather than horses.
At their meeting on 6 March 1901, the Joint Committee was advised that it was not necessary for the police to be re-sworn following the death of Queen Victoria.

There was far less crime in those days. For example the Joint Committee was told on 2 March 1904 that there were 4,621 summary convictions in the county during 1903 - including 728 men and 91 women convicted for drunkenness.

The minutes of the meeting on 1 December 1915 record a force establishment of 466 - Chief Constable and Deputy, 11 superintendents, 15 inspectors, 61 sergeants and 377 constables.

On 15 August 1914, at the outbreak of the First World War, the Joint Committee agreed to set up a volunteer police force to assist the County Police during the war - each volunteer should have a truncheon and an armband and give four hours duty a day.

In the next four years the Joint Committee received a series of reports about constables killed in action.

The Joint Committee met regularly throughout the Second World War, dealing with routine business. The minutes of their meetings make little reference to the war, though a few intriguing details are recorded. On 11 June 1941, for example, they agreed to pay a man £5 because his suit was irreparably damaged while helping to extinguish an incendiary bomb at Stratford Court House. On a number of occasions the Joint Committee agreed pensions for injured police officers and for the widows of those killed in action.

The Joint Committee received reports about the serious flooding on the East coast in 1953. On 1 June 1953 they endorsed emergency expenditure of £5,320 incurred by the Chief Constable; and they agreed to compensate people whose boats and equipment were lost or damaged whilst helping the police in the rescue operation. A year later, 85 claims for loss or damage to boats and equipment had been met, at a cost of £1,671.

The Police Authority in Essex

After the enactment of the Police Act 1964, the new Police Authority in Essex held its first meeting on 8 June 1965. It adopted some of the practices of the Standing Joint Committee, for example agreeing to supply its papers to the press. It agreed at the first meeting that the Force establishment should be 1,862 men and 55 women.
At that time the Police Authority was made up of 14 county councillors and seven magistrates. Four years later these figures were slightly increased following the amalgamation of the Essex and Southend police areas.

The next constitutional change was brought about by the Police and Magistrates Courts Act 1994. Following this legislation, the Essex Police Authority was set up on its present basis, with effect from 1 April 1995. It has recently published its fifth annual report. The Authority is made up of 17 members:

- nine councillors - seven from Essex County Council and one each from Southend-on-Sea Borough Council and Thurrock Council
- three magistrates appointed by Essex Magistrates' Courts Committee
- five independent members approved by the Home Office and appointed locally

The authority has five full meetings a year which are open to the press and public (although there is provision to exclude them when confidential matters are to be discussed). Copies of papers for meetings are sent to all the main libraries in Essex and to the local media. Agendas and meetings information are also available on the website. To carry out its various responsibilities, the Authority has established a sub-structure of smaller committees, groups and panels. The main elements of the Police Authority's role are:

- to approve an annual budget for Essex Police and to set a precept for the council tax to be collected by borough, district and unitary councils
- to agree and publish a local policing plan each year, setting out the policing priorities for the forthcoming year
- to issue a report after each financial year, to include an assessment of the performance of Essex Police
- to keep informed about the handling of complaints against the police
- to deal with matters concerning the Chief Constable, the Deputy and the Assistant Chief Constables, including their appointment
- to ensure that best value is obtained in the delivery of policing services

The present arrangements rest on a tri-partite division of responsibility and achieve a satisfactory balance between the Police Authority (local), the Chief Constable (operational) and the Home Secretary (legislation and Government policy).