



PRESS INFORMATION

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No Vote for Elected Police and Crime Commissioners

Members of Bedfordshire Police Authority will not be leading the way to the polling station to elect the County's first Police and Crime Commissioner. The concept, proposed by the Coalition Government, has not found favour with the Authority's diverse membership.

Penny Fletcher, an Independent member of the Authority, explained that this is not a egotistical attempt to retain the Authority's own status, but an informed opinion shared by many others, that the proposals will see a great deal of valuable experience lost at a crucial time. There is a strong feeling the proposals will mean additional expense for local taxpayers, make real representation for local people impossible and will see policing more susceptible to political interference than ever before. There is also a distinct possibility that the new arrangements will increase bureaucracy, not reduce it.

"These plans have been rushed through and there is little or no clarity in critical areas, such as the cost implications," she continued. "It is estimated that these elections will cost in the region of £50M In this 'age of austerity' we are supposed to be doing everything we can to reduce costs."

"We have no indication yet on the salary for this much-vaunted individual, but looking at the responsibility and scope of the role, the pay will have to be commensurate with that of the Chief Constable. And then there is the support structure, the Police and Crime Panels etc etc. It will all cost money."

The public's appetite for the proposal is also unknown – do people think it is a good idea and how many people will actually vote? The Authority is asking members of the public for their views. Simply log on to the website (www.bedfordshirepoliceauthority.co.uk) and answer the questions on the home page.

Just 25% of the local electorate turned out to vote for the first Mayor of Bedford and by its own admission the Home Office is not sure of a high turn-out for Police Commissioners.

Continuing Mrs Fletcher said: "We have serious concerns that the sheer election process will mean that only those with a campaign mechanism, such as political parties, or those who are appropriately funded will be able to stand. Not many people will fall into this bracket."

“If the new proposals get the green light, Chief Constables will be hired and fired by an individual who has been elected on a manifesto of specific aims and objectives and probably ambitious promises. There does not appear to be any clarification on suitable experience or skills for the role, and it’s hard to see where impartiality can lie in these circumstances.”

The Authority also has serious misgivings about representation of all communities. Currently the Police Authority, with its mix of independently appointed and locally elected councillor members, ensures that geographical, diversity and equality factors are taken into account.

“What possible chance does one person have?” said Fiona Chapman, a Conservative Councillor member. “It will be bad enough in Bedfordshire and Luton, but think about some of the bigger forces, the geography is mind boggling.

“There is also a real danger of Party Politics being brought into the Police Force, something which most Police Authorities are very careful to avoid.”

“Elected commissioners, on whatever mandate they achieve their status, will be obliged to be sympathetic to supportive special interest groups and political parties. Today’s local Policing Priorities are set by the Police Authority in consultation with local people. The Authority is concerned that under the proposed arrangements, local policing priorities could become victim to party politics or single issue campaigns and important issues such as serious and organised crime and counter terrorism will be downgraded.”

Shahzad Choudhry an Independent member, added: “We strongly support reform where the benefits are plain to see, but we do not believe in change for change’s sake. The Government’s paper states that Police Authorities are largely invisible. However, in a recent survey 64% of respondents were aware of Bedfordshire Police Authority. We’ve driven significant improvements in performance and it’s hard to see how one person with a new title will be able to achieve better results.

“The police service as a whole is facing an unprecedented financial challenge. We have a proven track record in delivering value for money and in Bedfordshire the Authority has driven an efficiency programme amounting to £17.9M, of which £12.5M is cashable savings, between 2006/7 and 2009/10. Is now the time for wholesale change? We don’t believe it is.”

Ends

For an interview with Penny Fletcher, Shahzad Choudhry or Fiona Chapman, please contact Sallie Blair on 01283 821012

Editor Notes

The commissioner, the support team and the Police and Crime Panel will between them take responsibility for areas such as:

- Holding the Chief Constable to Account – Police Authorities already do this effectively
- Appointing and where necessary firing the Chief Constable – Police Authorities do this using a panel of experienced members
- Representing and engaging local people to ensure that policing is available in and responsible to local communities' needs – Police Authorities have the mechanisms in place and undertake this role robustly. However, a recent survey shows that the appetite for engagement remains low unless there is a local concern.
- Driving collaboration – Bedfordshire Police Authority has led the way in collaboration and joint working
- Commissioners will play a considerable role in community safety – the Police Authority already works with the local CSPs

More information is available from the Police Authority.