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About the Authors

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This submission draws upon research undertaken by the authors, examining investigative policing, organisational learning, police reform, workforce sustainability and police wellbeing in England and Wales. That work consistently has identified challenges relating to increasing demand, growing complexity, workforce pressures, recruitment and retention, and the long-term sustainability of policing organizations. These themes inform the observations that follow.

The views expressed are those of the authors and should not be taken to represent the official position of LJMU or any other organisation.

Introduction

1. Where does the strain go? When policing is expected to do more without a corresponding increase in resources or reduction in existing responsibilities, pressure does not disappear. It is absorbed somewhere within the system. By officers, staff, supervisors and, ultimately, the communities they serve. This 'strain question' should sit at the centre of any discussion of policing reform in Wales.

2. Those debates largely have focused on governance arrangements, force structures and the possible devolution of policing responsibilities. While these are important considerations, they risk obscuring more fundamental issues: what is the problem that the reform of policing in Wales is intended to solve, and how will the proposed changes affect the distribution of organisational strain?

3. Much of the case for reform arises from operational challenges relating to demand, complexity, and organisational sustainability. Across England and Wales, policing faces increasing demand, growing complexity, workforce pressures, recruitment and retention challenges, and concerns regarding sustainability (HMICFRS, 2025). Research examining investigative policing identifies similar themes: increasing caseloads, expanding digital evidence burdens, reduced supervisory capacity, and increasing concern about workforce wellbeing and resilience (James et al., 2023; Cox et al., 2024; James, Cox and Carr, 2025).

4. Proposals concerning governance, accountability and organisational structure should therefore be evaluated against their likely impact on four interconnected issues: **Community** (the quality of relationships between policing and the public it serves), **Capability** (the operational capacity to respond to complex and serious demands), **Capacity** (workforce sustainability, resilience, and wellbeing), and **Confidence** (the ability of leaders to establish priorities, manage competing demands and define the limits of policing's responsibilities). The purpose of reform should be to strengthen all four; not to redistribute pressure from one to another.

Accountability and police governance

5. The proposed abolition of Police and Crime Commissioners (PCCs) provides an opportunity to reconsider how policing is held to account in Wales. Research on police legitimacy demonstrates that public trust is neither fixed nor guaranteed. It is continually shaped by perceptions of fairness, responsiveness and effectiveness (Bradford, 2024). Any future governance arrangements therefore should maintain a clear connection between community concerns and policing priorities while providing effective scrutiny of police leadership.

6. Accountability should extend beyond performance outcomes alone. Meaningful oversight requires recognition of the operational realities within which policing is delivered, including workforce pressures, organisational resilience and the management of demand (HMICFRS, 2025). The key issue is not the institutional form accountability takes but whether future arrangements support legitimacy, transparency, and informed scrutiny.

7. Governance should not merely monitor performance; it should help ensure that policing organisations remain sustainable, responsive to communities and capable of exercising appropriate discretion regarding priorities and demand. Applied to the Four Cs, the test for any new governance model is whether it strengthens community trust, supports operational capability, protects workforce capacity and gives leaders the confidence to make difficult decisions rather than simply adding a new reporting layer.

Force structures and organisational design

8. Debates concerning the optimal number of police forces in Wales often are framed as a choice between local responsiveness and organisational efficiency. In practice, the issue is more complex. Larger organisations may offer advantages in specialist capability, resilience and coordination, particularly in areas such as serious and organised crime, digital investigation, safeguarding and intelligence (HMICFRS, 2025). At the same time, legitimacy depends in large part upon the quality of the relationship between the police service and the communities it serves (Innes et al., 2020; Bradford, 2024).

9. Wales contains diverse communities with distinct social, cultural and linguistic characteristics. There is a continuing need to balance specialist capability with local responsiveness. The experience of Operation Tarian and all-Wales counter-terrorism arrangements demonstrates that specialist capability can be strengthened through collaboration without formal amalgamation. At the same time, these arrangements show

that collaboration requires sustained investment, clear governance and careful management of the relationship between specialist and local policing. Any proposal for force reorganisation therefore should explain how community engagement, local accountability and public confidence would be maintained or enhanced, rather than assumed

10. The historical debate concerning a single police force for Wales illustrates this further. The proposals advanced following HMIC's *Closing the Gap* review, primarily were driven by concerns regarding specialist capability and organisational resilience, particularly in relation to protective services, major investigations and serious organised crime (HMIC, 2005). Evidence considered by the Welsh Affairs Committee (2006) focused similarly upon operational capability, critical mass, and the ability of forces to respond to complex and exceptional demands.

11. Despite the prominence of these discussions in the mid-2000s, the debate subsequently diminished. Four factors may help explain this. First, policing remained a non-devolved responsibility, limiting the ability of Welsh institutions to pursue structural reform independently. Secondly, the wider programme of police force mergers across England and Wales lost momentum, reducing political interest in large-scale restructuring. Thirdly, regional collaboration arrangements (such as Tarian) emerged as an alternative means of enhancing specialist capability without formal amalgamation. Fourthly, the introduction of PCCs in 2012 reinforced the principle of locally accountable policing. Although PCCs did not cause earlier merger proposals to fail, they seem to have reduced subsequent political appetite for structural consolidation by embedding governance arrangements based upon geographically distinct police forces. Together, these developments contributed to a policy environment in which collaboration, rather than amalgamation, became the dominant approach to enhancing capability and resilience.

12. The available evidence does not provide a definitive basis for concluding that Wales should now have either a single police force or retain its current structure. A single force may offer advantages in terms of specialist capability, resilience and coordination. The current structure may offer advantages in terms of local accountability, community relationships and sensitivity to local priorities.

13. The difficulty is that these advantages are not directly comparable. Improvements in specialist capability may strengthen the ability to respond to serious and complex threats, while strong local relationships may enhance legitimacy, trust and the ability to understand community concerns. Both are important but they operate in different ways and are difficult to measure against one another. As a result, debates concerning force structures often reflect differing assumptions about what policing primarily is intended to achieve. The key question in this context is therefore not whether one model is inherently superior, but which arrangement is most likely to balance operational effectiveness, democratic accountability and public legitimacy within the Welsh context.

14. Research on organisational learning suggests that police reforms can generate unintended consequences and that initial gains may dissipate if they are not actively and consistently sustained (James, 2026). The issue therefore is less one of organisational size

than organisational effectiveness. Any proposal for restructuring should demonstrate not only how it would improve operational capability, but also how it would maintain community legitimacy, support workforce capacity and sustain leadership confidence. The most relevant question therefore is not whether a particular structure appears administratively efficient, but whether it is likely to improve outcomes for communities while strengthening operational effectiveness and organisational resilience.

The wider impact of reform

15. The success or otherwise of reform will depend less upon institutional arrangements than upon its effect on the daily realities of policing. One of the most persistent challenges facing contemporary policing is the accumulation of demand. New responsibilities, priorities and expectations frequently are introduced without corresponding reductions elsewhere. Over time, this places increasing pressure upon officers, staff and supervisors. One of the recurring themes in research is that addition is easier than subtraction and thus the former dominates reform narratives (James, Cox and Carr, 2026)

16. Research examining detective work in England and Wales provides a useful illustration of the consequences of this process, documenting increasing workloads, concerns regarding wellbeing, difficulties in maintaining investigative quality and challenges in retaining experienced personnel (James et al., 2023; James, Cox and Carr, 2025). HMICFRS (2025) identifies similar concerns across policing more broadly. If reforms create new expectations without addressing existing pressures, they risk redistributing rather than resolving organisational strain.

17. Any assessment of reform should therefore consider not only what additional responsibilities are being introduced, but also whether existing demands are being reduced, streamlined or transferred elsewhere. This is the minimum test. Without it, reform becomes another mechanism through which pressure simply moves rather than diminishes.

18. In Wales, this challenge is sharpened by the intersection of non-devolved policing with a devolved public service landscape that shapes, and is shaped by, the demands that policing often absorbs.

Devolution and public service integration

19. The implications of reform for Wales extend beyond governance and force structures. Recent reform proposals envisage a stronger national policing model, including greater coordination of serious and organised crime, specialist capabilities and national policing functions (Police Foundation, 2026). While these developments may strengthen operational Capability, they also raise questions about how national priorities will interact with Welsh public service arrangements.

20. The case for devolving policing rests upon the potential for greater alignment between policing and the wider public services upon which it increasingly depends. Health, social care, education, housing, youth justice, prevention and substance misuse services all shape the demands experienced by policing. Devolution may therefore offer opportunities for greater policy coherence and more integrated approaches to prevention and community

safety, particularly given that Wales already pursues a distinct approach to public service integration through the Well-being of Future Generations framework and collaborative regional partnerships.

21. The case against devolution is that crime does not respect administrative boundaries and that Wales currently benefits from England-and-Wales arrangements relating to serious and organised crime, counter-terrorism, specialist capabilities, training, standards and mutual aid. Devolution should therefore be supported where, and only where, it can satisfy three conditions: first, that it improves coherence between policing and devolved public services; secondly, that it does not weaken existing arrangements for serious and organised crime, counter-terrorism or specialist capability; and thirdly, that it reduces rather than adds to organisational strain. If proposed arrangements cannot demonstrate these outcomes, they risk repeating the mistakes of previous reform programmes by creating new governance without resolving the underlying pressures that prompted calls for change.

Confidence, leadership and organisational boundaries

22. Leadership confidence in contemporary policing has received remarkably little sustained scholarly attention. This gap matters beyond the context of reform: without a clearer understanding of how leaders navigate competing demands, establish organisational boundaries and communicate limits, the mechanisms through which strain is managed or transferred remain poorly understood.

23. Much discussion of police reform focuses on structures, resources and governance. Comparatively less attention is given to the confidence of leaders to establish priorities, maintain organisational boundaries and communicate the limits of what policing can reasonably deliver. Yet, leadership Confidence is central to the management of organisational strain. When organisations lack the confidence to challenge new demands or define the limits of their responsibilities, pressure is transferred downwards and absorbed by officers, staff and supervisors (James, Cox and Carr, 2026).

24. Future governance arrangements should actively support leaders in making difficult decisions about priorities, demand and resource allocation. Reform is unlikely to succeed if it creates new structures while leaving unresolved the underlying pressures that prompted calls for change.

Conclusion

25. Where does the strain go? This question, rather than the question of which governance model to adopt, should determine the shape of policing reform in Wales. The evidence shows consistently that policing faces significant pressures arising from increasing demand, workforce strain and growing complexity (HMICFRS, 2025; James et al., 2023; Cox et al 2024, James, Cox and Carr, 2025). Structural change does not automatically resolve these pressures; it can just as easily redistribute them. Reform succeeds only when it can sustain performance over time and when leaders possess the confidence to establish priorities and accept responsibility for difficult decisions (James, 2026; Police Foundation, 2026).

26. The Committee is invited to evaluate each reform proposal against the Four Cs. Does it strengthen Community relationships and public legitimacy? Does it enhance operational Capability without creating new, uncompensated burdens? Does it protect workforce Capacity and organisational resilience and does it give leaders the Confidence to manage demand, establish priorities and define what policing is (and is not) responsible for delivering?

27. Reform should be judged not by the scale of institutional change it produces, but by whether it improves outcomes for communities while strengthening the capacity, resilience and sustainability of the police service. If the underlying pressures remain, reform may be found to have changed the structure of policing in Wales without changing the realities of policing.

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