Norfolk's Police and Crime Commissioner (PCC) response to inspections published by His Majesty's Inspectorate of Constabulary and Fire & Rescue Services (HMICFRS)

Section 55 of the Police Act 1996 (as amended by section 37 of the Policing and Crime Act 2017) requires local policing bodies to respond and publish comments on all inspection reports pertaining to your force within 56 days of report publication.

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Key Findings

This is Michelle Skeer OBE QPM's report to the Secretary of State under section 54(4) of the Police Act 1996. It contains their independent assessment of the efficiency and effectiveness of policing in England and Wales. It is based on the inspections carried out between 1 August 2025 and 4 September 2026.

When compiling the assessment, Michelle Skeer OBE QPM wrote to chief constables, police and crime commissioners and their mayoral equivalents, and other interested parties. They invited them to give their views on the state of policing in England and Wales. A good range of responses were received, including a reply from every chief constable in England and Wales.

In this report, Michelle Skeer OBE QPM gives their views on police reform and describes the Inspectorates findings from their regular inspection programmes, thematic inspections and police effectiveness, efficiency and legitimacy (PEEL) inspections.

On 25 January 2026, the government published its long-awaited white paper on police reform, 'From local to national: a new model for policing'. It sets out wide-ranging proposals to significantly change the policing model in England and Wales. The Home Secretary said that "taken together, they are the most significant modernisation in nearly 200 years". The proposals include:

- The creation of a National Police Service
- A plan to reduce the number of forces
- Revisions to the system of police funding
- Investment in neighbourhood policing
- A renewed focus on performance and productivity
- Improvements to leadership
- The creation of a more capable police workforce.

The chief constables, police and crime commissioners and other senior leaders who responded to the for evidence for this report broadly agreed on the need for reform. But there isn't agreement on all points. Views differ on what the reforms should involve. This includes the priorities, the speed of change and the safeguards needed.

The report states that policing in England and Wales has many strengths. The greatest of these is the police workforce. Most police officers, staff, volunteers and special constables carry out their duties with professionalism, courage and a commitment to serve the public. The police service is also operationally resilient. It has repeatedly shown it can respond effectively to crises, emergencies and national events. Policing continues to show a remarkable capacity to mobilise, work collectively and adapt rapidly to changing circumstances. This is the case whether it is dealing with large-scale public disorder, natural disasters, national security threats or major investigations.

An additional strength identified within the report is the police service's commitment to continuous improvement. Throughout inspections and work with forces, I have seen how much officers, staff and leaders want to provide the best possible service to the public. They don't avoid scrutiny, challenge or accountability. Instead, they want to learn from mistakes, improve performance and achieve better outcomes for victims and communities.

The report states that the police service known today was last designed from a whole-system perspective in the 1960s, after the 1962 Royal Commission on the Police. Since then, crime and society have changed dramatically. The British model of policing, founded on policing by consent, the office of constable and operational independence, is still strong. But the system that organises and operates policing is increasingly struggling to provide efficient, effective and legitimate services. Traditional offences such as violence, theft and criminal damage have generally decreased over the last decade. The police service should

be recognised for its contributions to preventing crime. But too many of the people who become victims of crime each year are left disappointed by the service they receive. The police service must focus on preventing and detecting crimes in local communities. Over the same period, the police service has faced rising demands from changing crime, evolving threats and a greater recognition of vulnerability. A growing proportion of offending uses technology and is committed online or crosses local, national and international boundaries.

Public expectations of how the police service should protect vulnerable people have rightly increased. Officers and staff are dealing with more domestic abuse, child sexual abuse and exploitation, sexual violence, mental ill health and other safeguarding concerns. These cases are often complex, high risk and resource intensive.

His Majesty's Inspectorate for Constabulary and Fire & Rescue Services (HMICFRS) inspections and the force management statements that every force produces show the strain. Many forces are struggling to meet everyday demand and also to maintain the specialist capabilities they need to tackle complex threats.

The way the police service is funded is outdated and is compounding some of the problems. Most of the chief constables and police and crime commissioners who responded to the call for evidence raised financial sustainability as a matter of significant concern. While police reform will carry risk, maintaining the existing system is far from risk free. The evidence points to a system under increasing strain that must change dramatically before its weaknesses lead to further decline in efficiency and effectiveness.

The report suggests that a National Police Service could provide much-needed strategic leadership. The white paper proposes substantial changes to the structure of policing, including the creation of a National Police Service (NPS). This offers an opportunity to simplify a fragmented system, strengthen specialist capabilities and organise more functions centrally. The NPS would be a new police force, under the direction and control of a national police commissioner. It would take a strategic leadership role for policing in England and Wales. The NPS would assume responsibility for strategy, standards, support services for territorial forces and the national response to terrorism and serious and organised crime. Establishing the NPS will be exceptionally complex. It must be introduced carefully in stages so that the risks to the public are managed and minimised during the transition period. From the outset, its governance arrangements must establish clear responsibilities and robust accountability, oversight and transparency.

Reducing the number of forces could offer significant benefits, but reform needs a wider focus than force size. The white paper committed the government to reducing the number of territorial forces by merging forces. The government has commissioned an independent review of police force structures, chaired by Lord Bernard Hogan-Howe, to recommend the most effective number and configuration of forces. The review will also consider the design of the proposed Local Policing Areas in the new model, governance arrangements, implementation, including minimising operational disruption, and the forces best suited to merge first. Fewer, larger forces should improve resilience, provide more reliable access to specialist capabilities, reduce duplication and make national co-ordination easier. HMICFRS' inspection evidence doesn't show that larger forces always perform better as

some smaller forces provide good services, while some of the largest forces have experienced serious performance problems. Leadership, governance, workforce capability, operating-model design and the ability to translate strategy into consistent operational services have a much greater effect on performance than the size of a force. Structural reform could bring significant benefits, but it needs a wider focus than force size alone.

Views shared with Michelle Skeer OBE QPM about force mergers were the most divided. Some chief constables supported larger strategic forces, while others questioned whether there was enough evidence that larger forces would produce better outcomes for the public. In particular, many chief constables highlighted the risks during transition, including the potential for significant costs, workforce uncertainty, operational service disruption and IT challenges. Most police and crime commissioners are against force mergers and the plans to change local police governance. They are concerned that policing could become more remote from local community priorities, less accountable and less connected to local partnership organisations.

The report suggests that effective leadership will be fundamental to every aspect of police reform as HMICFRS inspection evidence consistently shows that good policing performance depends on effective leadership. The white paper proposes a central appointments panel to support the selection process for chief constables. Although leadership at all levels is essential, no individual is more influential within a force than its chief constable. Chief constables set the strategy, direction and culture of their forces. The public has every right to expect that only suitably qualified candidates are shortlisted for interview.

The report identifies that while the workforce is still the police service's greatest strength, its effectiveness is at risk. Too many officers and staff experience low morale and poor well-being. These problems have accumulated over many years and reflect high workloads, inconsistent support and development and a widespread feeling among members of the workforce that they aren't valued enough by forces, government or the public.

Forces are also managing significant gaps in experience, skills and supervision. Some of these pressures should ease as those recruited during the Police Uplift Programme gain experience. But experience alone isn't enough. Forces must:

- understand the capabilities they will need in the future
- strengthen supervision and professional development
- recruit and retain the right combination of officers and staff.

The police reform white paper contains several measures intended to create a more capable, professional and sustainable workforce. These include changing the focus on officer headcount targets to a focus on the results achieved for the public. Policing needs this system-wide view to help it make well-informed, evidence-led decisions. The strategy must create a more effective approach to attracting, recruiting, developing, supporting and retaining officers and staff.

Michelle Skeer OBE QPM states that an increased focus on performance will help to promote improvements. Good performance is critical to better outcomes for the public. But

too often, the Inspectorate found that forces didn't provide the most effective services they could with the resources they had. Substantial reform, particularly structural reform, could make this problem worse in the short term because it will divert leadership capacity and resources towards implementing change. Reform mustn't be allowed to distract forces from their primary responsibility to prevent and detect crime. One of the most important tests for forces will be maintaining services and improving operational performance throughout the period of change.

On 16 July 2026, HMICFRS published details of the new Policing Performance System. The Inspectorate have assigned every police force in England and Wales a performance level, ranging from Level One, the default level, to Level Four (Special Measures) for the most significant performance issues. This replaces the previous 'Scan' and 'Engage' monitoring system. Norfolk Constabulary were assigned Level One. The new Police Performance Framework has addressed the Inspectorate's previous recommendation for a single framework covering all core aspects of police performance.

The report states that better use of technology and artificial intelligence could substantially improve productivity. Almost every investigation involves digital evidence. Criminals are increasingly using new technologies, including artificial intelligence (AI) so policing must do so too. The report suggests that most police spending on technology is on sustaining old systems. Many of these systems are outdated and poorly integrated and rely on manual processing. Several chief constables told Michelle Skeer OBE QPM how these weaknesses hampered productivity, effective information sharing and responses to crimes that cross force boundaries.

In April 2025, HMICFRS started the 2025–27 inspections of police effectiveness, efficiency and legitimacy (PEEL) in the 43 police forces in England and Wales. At the end of each PEEL inspection cycle, the Inspectorate review the inspection programme to consider changes in the policing environment and the inspection findings. HMICFRS used what they learned from the PEEL 2023–25 inspection programme to develop their 2025–27 methodology.

After assessing previous findings, changes in policing and the views gathered from extensive external consultation, HMICFRS changed the content, structure and focus of the core questions. The main changes are:

- The quality service review has replaced the separate victim service assessment and is included in relevant questions.
- Dip sampling of crime recording and reporting findings in the relevant question has replaced the separate crime data integrity audit.
- HMICFRS regular custody inspection programme has become part of PEEL.
- Fraud inspection activity has been added to PEEL.
- Managing suspects and offenders is no longer a core question within PEEL.
- Leadership and the reducing crime assessment are now included in the HM Inspector's summary, along with vulnerability, instead of being separate sections.

In HMICFR's PEEL 2025–27 inspection programme, they grade forces across nine areas:

- Leadership and force management;
- Attracting, developing and retaining the workforce and creating a diverse and inclusive workplace.
- Using police powers fairly, appropriately and with justification.
- Preventing and deterring crime and antisocial behaviour, and reducing vulnerability.
- Responding to the public.
- Investigating crime.
- Safeguarding children and adults at risk of harm.
- Managing fraud.
- Providing a safe and lawful custody environment.

At the time of this report, Norfolk Constabulary's PEEL assessment had yet to be published.

The report also detailed how improvements in police integrity arrangements should help to increase public trust and confidence. Forces need to make sure that only the right people can join and stay in the police. Vetting applicants is an important part of how forces do this. HMICFRS found that forces were investing in their vetting units and had a better understanding of designated posts. They were using formal vetting-decision rationale forms to record their decisions. But forces still weren't consistently identifying, assessing, understanding and mitigating risk. Forces' quality assurance processes for vetting decisions need to improve. A lack of national vetting training is also leading to inconsistency in vetting decision-making.

In professional standards investigations, forces were generally making reasonable and proportionate decisions. But too often, particularly during the initial handling of complaints, the officers or staff making these decisions didn't have a high enough rank or grade.

The report identified that the police service is committed to tackling serious and organised crime, but inconsistencies remain. Michelle Skeer OBE QPM was pleased to see that the National Police Chiefs' Council Serious and Organised Crime (SOC) portfolio is co-ordinating work across the SOC system. It is leading a substantial programme of work to improve Regional and Organised Crime Units (ROCU) governance, funding, workforce sustainability, digital capabilities, performance management and long-term capability planning. This work is closely linked to wider police reform. It aims to create a more sustainable, consistent and effective response to SOC. HMICFRS found that officers and staff working within ROCUs were dedicated to tackling SOC. They used an impressive range of specialist skills and capabilities to tackle complex threats professionally and effectively.

The report states that police forces need to improve their child protection work. HMICFRS found that many forces needed to improve: the leadership of child protection functions, their understanding and recording of the voice of the child; and how well they investigated

incidents involving children, including online child sexual exploitation. Furthermore, forces have improved their response to group-based child sexual exploitation but still need to do more.

Michelle Skeer OBE QPM makes clear within the report that the legal framework and governance arrangements for firearms licensing need a complete overhaul. The firearms licensing system in England and Wales isn't fit for purpose. HMICFRS found that policing hadn't adequately addressed the recommendations made in the 2015 inspection of firearms licensing. The Inspectorate also found that firearms licensing legislation needed major changes. The original legislation was developed in a very different social and policing environment. Amendments mean the legal framework has also become increasingly complex over time. As a result, forces across England and Wales interpret and apply the law differently.

Recommendations

There were no recommendations made.

Areas for Improvement

There were no areas for improvement.

Chief Constable response to report and any Recommendations/Areas for Improvement

I welcome the publication of *State of Policing: The Annual Assessment of Policing in England and Wales 2025–2026.*

The report rightly recognises the resilience, professionalism, and commitment of the police workforce. At a time when policing is subject to considerable scrutiny, it is important that we are candid about where improvement is required, while also recognising the dedication of officers, staff and volunteers who continue to deliver vital services in increasingly demanding circumstances. I agree strongly with the report's assessment that policing retains considerable strength, talent, and determination on which future improvement and reform can be built.

I welcome HMICFRS's acknowledgement of the changing nature and increasing complexity of police demand. Reductions in some traditional crime types do not tell the whole story about the pressures facing policing. Greater recognition of vulnerability, increasingly complex investigations, digital evidence, and the demands associated with domestic abuse, violence against women and girls, child abuse and exploitation, and other forms of serious harm all require significant investigative and safeguarding capacity. The report rightly identifies the resulting pressure on forces and the importance of considering demand, capability, and resources together.

I particularly welcome the prominence given to financial sustainability, which I consider to be perhaps the greatest strategic risk to the future effectiveness of policing. HMICFRS's assessment similarly recognises that the current funding arrangements are contributing to pressures across the service and records the significant concern expressed by many Chief Constables and Police and Crime Commissioners. Sustainable reform will ultimately require sustainable funding, including the capital investment necessary to modernise technology and infrastructure rather than placing increasing pressure on already constrained revenue budgets.

The report's findings concerning technology and productivity are similarly important. There is considerable scope for technology, artificial intelligence, and better-designed processes to release capacity and improve outcomes for the public. However, HMICFRS also recognises the limitations created by outdated and poorly integrated systems and the need for sustained capital investment if policing is to realise these opportunities consistently. Productivity cannot be achieved simply by expecting an already stretched workforce to absorb ever-increasing demand.

I welcome, too, the balanced assessment of neighbourhood policing. Visible and effective local policing remains fundamental to public confidence, prevention and problem-solving. However, these ambitions need to be supported by sufficient capacity and must be balanced against wider operational demands. Increasing neighbourhood resources by drawing officers away from other critical areas risks simply transferring pressure from one part of policing to another.

More broadly, I strongly support the ambition for police reform and welcome the report's recognition that reform must be evidence-led and carefully managed. Its conclusion that larger forces do not automatically deliver better outcomes is particularly important. Equally

significant is its recognition of the operational risks associated with structural change. With a number of major reforms and national programmes being delivered concurrently, careful sequencing and coordination will be essential to ensure that the cumulative impact of change does not undermine operational resilience or the service provided to the public.

I also welcome the report's recognition that policing cannot be considered in isolation from the wider criminal justice and public service system. Changes to sentencing, prison releases and probation arrangements will transfer additional demand into policing, while pressures elsewhere in the criminal justice system can affect the timeliness of investigations and outcomes for victims. Similarly, police officers continue to respond to situations that may be more appropriately addressed by other agencies. Effective and sustainable reform must therefore extend beyond policing and recognise the interdependencies across the wider system.

Overall, the report provides a valuable and balanced assessment of the challenges and opportunities facing policing. Policing has demonstrated considerable resilience, but resilience should not be mistaken for sustainability. Successful reform will depend on realistic and sustainable funding, investment in our people and technology, evidence-led decisions and careful implementation. Getting those foundations right will be essential if we are to strengthen policing for the future while continuing to provide the service the public rightly expects.

PCC response to report and any Recommendations/Areas for Improvement

I welcome the publication of State of Policing: The Annual Assessment of Policing in England and Wales 2025-2026, which provides an important and independent assessment of the challenges and opportunities facing policing across the country. The report highlights both the considerable pressures on forces and the significant work being undertaken to improve services for the public.

The report recognises that policing continues to operate in an increasingly complex environment, with rising demand, evolving threats, increasing public expectations and significant pressure on resources. It also highlights concerns around the quality of service the public receives, particularly in relation to crime investigation, victim outcomes, safeguarding vulnerable people and maintaining public confidence.

As Police and Crime Commissioner, I recognise the dedication and professionalism shown every day by officers, staff and volunteers who continue to serve the public in challenging circumstances.

I share the view that the public deserves a policing service that is visible, responsive and effective. Residents expect crimes to be investigated thoroughly, victims to be supported throughout the criminal justice process, and those who are vulnerable to receive timely protection. The findings of this report reinforce the importance of maintaining a relentless focus on these priorities.

I welcome the report's emphasis on strong leadership, workforce wellbeing, performance management and the opportunities presented by technology and artificial intelligence to improve productivity and public service. These are all areas where policing must continue to evolve if it is to meet future demand and make best use of public investment.

The report also highlights the need for improvements in crime investigations, safeguarding, child protection and the response to fraud. I will continue to hold the Chief Constable to account for the performance of Norfolk Constabulary in these areas while supporting the investment and organisational changes required to deliver sustainable improvement.

Public confidence remains fundamental to policing, but maintaining trust requires consistent professionalism, transparency and accountability across every aspect of policing.

As Commissioner, I remain committed to supporting improvement, scrutinising performance and ensuring that policing continues to deliver the service that the public expects and deserves.

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- Response submitted to the HMICFRS Monitoring Portal.
- Response forwarded to the Chief Constable.
- Response forwarded to the Norfolk Police and Crime Panel.
- Response published on the OPCCN website.