

‘The Big Society can help us bring policing closer to the people’

By Sara Thornton

Published: The Daily Telegraph: 7:52AM BST 30 Jul 2010

Last Monday, the Prime Minister outlined his vision of a Big Society, where volunteering is encouraged, power devolved and provision diversified. On Tuesday, reports from the Audit Commission and Inspectorate of Constabulary argued that the police could cope with cuts of £1 billion – approximately 12 per cent of their budget – but that beyond that, services to the public would be affected.

It is every chief constable's worst nightmare to be asked to deliver the same service with only three quarters of the officers and staff. But could the ideas behind the Big Society be a way to develop a new and cheaper approach to keeping people safe, to make our forces less reliant on professionals, more local, and less bureaucratic?

In my own force, Thames Valley, we have been gradually building up our special constabulary. But we also rely on more than 600 volunteers, who staff the quieter stations, look after our dogs, give chaplaincy support and help with the admin. While many are retired, more than 100 are under 24. And in smaller communities, where the police station is more valued than used, volunteers can keep them running when no business case could be made for full-time staff: the police point in Sandhurst, near Bracknell, is run completely by volunteers, and recently celebrated its 10th anniversary.

Volunteers can also take a more active role. Over the past few years, we have developed Neighbourhood Action Groups, in which local people work with neighbourhood policing teams to agree priorities. In Banbury, the group has organised litter picks to clean up problem estates. In Slough, where street prostitution was a real problem, the Neighbourhood Action Group went on patrol with residents. In rural Oxfordshire, a group has been helping farmers and doctors to make emergency plans for floods or snow.

By listening to communities in this way, we can act on their concerns. For example, while the police are often accused of persecuting motorists, we found that in 175 of the 263 neighbourhoods in the Thames Valley, stopping speeding was considered a priority. Where the problem is not severe enough for formal enforcement, we have a number of speed indicators that can be used by local people, working with officers. In one area, local schoolchildren helped man the speed check, and wrote the warning letters. There were a few red faces in the cars driving away.

The police do have a good track record in using volunteers and encouraging local participation. But there may never be a better time to step up our efforts. For me, three steps need to be taken. First, the Government could help increase the number of special constables by allocating grants for additional training and uniforms, and encouraging employers to provide support. Also, volunteering can be a bureaucratic process because of the checks that are required – so there might be scope to take a more proportionate view of the risk.

Second, we need to give people the confidence to tackle anti-social behaviour. In Germany, two thirds of citizens would intervene in public; in this country, two thirds would not. Referring everything to the police, and the legal system, is not the answer to every problem – nor is it affordable.

Finally, we need new ways to harness the experience of officers and the desire of communities to engage with policing. Volunteers, Neighbourhood Watch, Horse Watch, Countryside Watch, Neighbourhood Action Groups and the special constabulary are good examples of local participation. But the Big Society concept is a great opportunity to explore how we can develop different and better ways of keeping people safe.

Sara Thornton is the Chief Constable of Thames Valley Police.