

The Architecture of National Policing During the COVID-19 Era

An Examination of National Strategic Governance

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Author's Note:

This paper is based on contemporaneous official records which I have recently examined.

Introduction

The public generally understands policing through the officers they encounter in their local communities.

Chief Constables are often perceived as leading independent police forces, each exercising operational discretion within their own jurisdiction.

That understanding is correct, but incomplete.

Behind local policing exists a national strategic architecture through which senior policing leaders meet regularly with central government, exchange information, discuss operational priorities and coordinate responses to events affecting the country as a whole.

Such engagement is neither unusual nor inherently controversial.

The COVID-19 pandemic undoubtedly represented such a period.

What is less widely appreciated is the scale, frequency and seniority of those engagements.

This paper examines the structure of those meetings and the senior public officials involved.

National Leadership

During the period examined, senior policing leaders met repeatedly with ministers and senior government officials.

Meetings occurred both physically and remotely.

Among the venues used were:

- 10 Downing Street;
- 2 Marsham Street, the Home Office;
- Microsoft Teams; and

- other national strategic forums convened for operational purposes.

The frequency of those meetings demonstrates that national policing coordination was not occasional - It was continuous.

Beginning in 2019, senior meetings took place regularly throughout the pandemic period and continued thereafter.

COVID-19 and Strategic Coordination

As the pandemic developed, the pattern of engagement intensified considerably.

Dedicated operational conference calls were established between national policing leadership and the Home Secretary.

Those calls evolved into a regular operational mechanism.

Initially taking place daily, they later moved to scheduled weekly arrangements before continuing on an ad hoc basis as circumstances required.

Alongside those operational calls were numerous meetings concerned specifically with COVID-19 strategy and enforcement.

These included discussions involving:

- the Home Secretary;
- all Chief Constables;
- national policing leadership;
- Cabinet Office officials; and
- ministerial coordination meetings.

Separate meetings addressed matters including:

- COVID enforcement;
- COVID operational guidance;
- magistrates' courts;
- Strategic Capabilities;
- Cabinet Office enforcement;
- COBR ministerial coordination; and
- wider operational policing matters.

Collectively, they illustrate an extensive programme of strategic engagement rather than isolated consultation.

Meetings at the Centre of Government

Particularly notable are meetings convened within the highest levels of government.

Among those identified are meetings held at 10 Downing Street involving senior political leaders together with national policing representatives.

One in-person meeting concerning COVID enforcement brought together participants including:

- the Prime Minister;
- the Home Secretary;
- the Cabinet Secretary;
- Martin Hewitt;
- Owen Weatherill;
- Tricia Hayes, Director General of the Home Office Crime, Policing and Fire Group;
- Dame Cressida Dick;
- Regional Chief Constables (via Zoom);
- the Health Secretary; and
- Dominic Cummings.

The seniority of those attending demonstrates that operational policing during the pandemic was being discussed alongside ministers and the most senior officials within government.

Again, that fact is not, of itself, remarkable.

National emergencies require national coordination.

What is remarkable however, is the extent to which that architecture has remained largely outside wider public understanding.

The Rhythm of National Command

The documentary record also reveals an organised rhythm of strategic engagement.

Meetings addressed subjects including:

- Strategic Capabilities;
- COVID guidance;
- COVID enforcement;
- operational updates;
- magistrates' courts;
- protests;
- COBR coordination;
- conference calls with all Chief Constables; and
- operational discussions with ministers.

Rather than isolated events, these meetings formed an interconnected programme of governance extending across government and national policing.

They illustrate that COVID policing was managed within an established strategic command environment involving repeated communication between policing leadership and central government.

Matters of Record

One further feature merits observation.

Some entries relating to these meetings expressly record that there was no record of the agenda.

Operational meetings can, of course, be conducted in many different ways.

Nevertheless, from the perspective of constitutional accountability, it naturally raises questions regarding the documentary record available to explain the subjects discussed and any decisions reached.

It is, after all, certainly so that transparency is strengthened where important national operational meetings are capable of subsequent examination through an appropriate documentary trail.

Conclusion

The purpose of this paper has been modest.

It has sought to illuminate something fundamental – That the architecture of national policing during the COVID-19 era was extensive. It involved repeated engagement between senior policing leaders and the highest levels of government. It included strategic meetings, operational calls, ministerial discussions, Cabinet Office coordination, COBR engagement and direct interaction with all Chief Constables.

For many readers, that architecture will come as a surprise.

This paper therefore asks an informed question.

When history records the policing of the COVID-19 era, should the public understand it principally as the sum of forty-three individual police forces, or as a nationally coordinated strategic enterprise operating through an extensive framework of continuous engagement between policing leadership and central government?