

Police Force Mutual Aid

Briefing for prospective police and crime commissioners



Mutual aid is the provision of policing assistance from one force to another and is usually provided in response to or in anticipation of a major incident or event. As forces face cutbacks in specialist and mainstream capability, mutual aid agreements will remain a key part of public-order policing, and the revised Strategic Policing Requirement issued on 31st July requires police and crime commissioners and chief constables to plan and prepare to deal with public order or public safety threats that cannot be managed by a single force on its own.

In this article Barry Loveday, Reader in Criminal Justice at the University of Portsmouth and Rick Naylor QPM, former President of the Superintendents' Association of England and Wales look at the implications for police and crime commissioners of the need to provide mutual aid.

Mutual aid activity can vary on a scale which runs from small scale regular and frequent deployment of specialist resources between police forces through to large scale deployments of police personnel and support staff to deal with an extraordinary event that the host force cannot deal with using its own resources. One example of that was to prove to be the request for mutual aid from neighbouring force by the MPS. Indeed this was to be demonstrated very clearly in the course of last summers' disturbances in London and elsewhere. The sudden or spontaneous eruption of public disorder can mean that the use of mutual aid between police forces becomes an essential component within the armoury of local police forces. In the absence of a national police riot unit as for example operates in France with the CRS, local police forces rely very heavily on providing mutual aid when disturbances threaten public order.

One force that traditionally has provided rather than requested mutual aid to surrounding forces was the Met which in 2011 demonstrated that the UK's biggest police force was deemed to need direct support from neighbouring police forces to deal with a level of disorder that had not been experienced in the capital since the 1980s. It remains a matter of debate as to whether best use was to be made by the Met of the additional police resources sent to support their officers on the ground [[Reading the Riots](#), Prasad and Hyde, The Guardian 1/7/12].

Mutual Aid between police forces is based on statute being governed by section 24 of the Police Act 1996 and is the provision of policing assistance from one force to another. It is fair to say that policy regarding the use of mutual aid has been developing since the early 1980s as a consequence of the coal industry dispute of 1984/5. The coal dispute at this time was to test the concept of police mutual aid to the limit but was to be marked by a commitment by central government to carry the costs of mutual aid activity during the course of the strike.

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This however is not a consistent feature of mutual aid and the potential costs of requesting police support from neighbouring forces while not prohibitive might suggest that caution is exercised in its use by the hosting police force. Some indication of the complexities of charging for police services within a mutual aid arrangement can be discovered within the ACPO document of that name and which will be considered in more detail later [[ACPO Guidance on Charging for Police Service Mutual Aid Cost Recovery](#), May 2010]. It is the case however that the hosting force is made liable for all the costs associated with the receipt of mutual aid which is in line with a charging policy laid down by ACPO.

With regard to the operation of mutual aid particularly in relation to large scale deployments of mutual aid there is a centrally coordinated body made responsible for its oversight.

Currently the coordinating function is the responsibility of the Police National Information Coordination Centre [formerly known as the National reporting Centre] which is based at Scotland Yard in London and which has direct links to the Government Co-ordinating Centre [Cobra]. The current police response to serious disorder which may involve the use of mutual aid has recently been highlighted by ACPO in relation to last summer's urban disorder. In a comment on Mutual Aid an ACPO spokesman stated that:

“When a force requires supplementary resources from across the country to respond to an incident, the Police National Information Coordination Centre (PNICC) is activated to coordinate the supply of additional officers and equipment to that force. To support the Metropolitan Police's operation to combat the disorder, PNICC has been activated and will provide aid from across the country.” [[Community Justice Portal](#) 12/8/11].

While major incidents involving mutual aid between police forces can usually be expected to generate considerable media attention the fact is that aid is and will remain an integral element to local policing. This is because much of mutual aid activity takes place at the lower end of the scale and does not excite any media interest. There is for example regular deployment of specialist police resources to neighbouring forces. Examples of this would include deployment of mounted officers and horses through the football season. Not every force has a mounted deployment and these find it more advantageous [and economical] to buy in this support on a match by match basis. Moreover some forward planning can be made concerning this type of mutual aid once the season's fixture list is announced. This low key but significant function provides a resource channel which may not be available to smaller police forces but which can be provided by neighbouring police forces.

However there are varying degrees of mutual aid. Sometimes this can be required on a spontaneous basis as was to occur in 2011 and the inner city riots. However mutual aid can also be required for pre-planned events such as the G8 conference at Gleneagles in 2007 and the Olympic Games.

Mutual aid is usually requested and sent in multiples of Police Support Units [PSUs] which are made up of one inspector three sergeants and eighteen constables in addition to their vehicles.

There are also a range of responsibilities within mutual aid arrangements that fall to the host force. For large scale deployments over protracted periods it is vital for example that the hosting force has the correct level of logistics support to deal with refreshment accommodation and other needs of the mutual aid personnel received. It is also important to note that when in the hosting force the PSUs become the immediate and sole responsibility of the Chief Constable of the hosting force. This of course runs from direction and control of the PSU through to any potential liabilities arising from their use.

It is estimated that the typical cost for a Level 2 PSU is £6922 per day. Some of the intricacies associated with costing which would fall to a hosting force are detailed in the ACPO Document 'Guidance on Charging for police service' identified above.

Even with the growth of collaboration between police forces in future years it will be an ongoing feature of local policing that 'mutual aid' in response to range of challenges will continue to operate. Within a policing system that is local and also one that, in contrast to much of the rest of Europe, does not provide a national riot police, it can be expected that the commitment to mutual aid can be expected to both continue and grow.

One consequence of the continuing use of mutual aid will be the need for a future PCC as budget holder, to be fully aware of the potential use and cost of mutual aid to the hosting police force. Any PCC would for example expect to be informed by the chief constable in regard to the scale of mutual aid planned and deployments both for receiving and donating police forces. The chief constable would remain responsible for any operational decision concerning mutual aid but the PCC would expect to be 'kept in the loop'.

Acting within the 'loop' would mean that the PCC would be required to ascertain what potential costs might arise from the use of mutual aid and if the force was donating officers, what impact this might have, for example, on operational policing within the force boundary. The PCC would want to know, therefore, what contingencies were being put in place to support core policing functions in the force area if it were donating officers under mutual aid. PCCs would also need to satisfy themselves that both logistical support and accounting systems were in place and fit for purpose for any large scale mutual aid deployments.

As noted above while the Chief Constable retains responsibility for operational policing it would be entirely appropriate for the PCC to explore with the chief constable the extent to which that officer has either called for mutual aid support or has been requested to provide it. This might extend to ensuring that the PCC is made aware of any relevant information generated by the PNICC which involves the police force. Under mutual aid agreements, mutual aid outside national emergencies, can be requested but will require the consent of the donating police force.

PCCs therefore should be fully appraised as to the frequency of calls for

mutual aid, the reasons justifying it and also the potential costs of such aid. Could for example the better management of local police resources reduce the need for calls for mutual aid where the costs of such aid becomes potentially prohibitive? Is there a case for developing a public order specialist function 'in house' or would a mutual aid agreement actually prove to be a cheaper option? Given the extent of the use of mutual aid in contemporary policing it is important that the PCC is fully conversant with both the mechanism of mutual aid and the reasons used to either call for assistance by the host force or the request by the receiving force. During the course of the Coal Dispute 1984-5 a number of police authorities for example concluded in relation to the National Reporting Centre [the predecessor body to the PNICC] that neither they nor their chief constable had effective control over their local force as the NRC requested that additional officers be provided by local police forces irrespective of any opposition from the police authority.

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