



Devon and Cornwall Police and Crime Panel

5 October 2018

Report of the Police and Crime Commissioner

RATIONALE OF PCC ALISON HERNANDEZ ON HER PROPOSED DECISION REGARDING POTENTIAL MERGER WITH DORSET POLICE

Position: As Police and Crime Commissioner for Devon, Cornwall and the Isles of Scilly I have considered the Final Business Case for merger with Dorset Police, taken into account the views of the Chief Constable and listened to our key stakeholders and those who participated in the engagement activity during the summer. Whilst I agree that the business case is complete and demonstrates a case for merger I do not consider that progressing with the proposal will be in the best interests of the people of Devon, Cornwall and the Isles of Scilly. I am therefore intending not to agree to submit the business case to the Home Office.

Rationale: The reason I supported the exploration of a merger with Dorset was because I have a duty to the residents of Devon, Cornwall and the Isles of Scilly to ensure that they have the best possible police force. Years of austerity have forced greater collaborations, and owing to the successes of the Strategic Alliance with Dorset it was appropriate to consider whether moving this to a fully integrated model and the creation of a new Force would deliver greater benefits to residents.

As the Police and Crime Commissioner for Devon, Cornwall and the Isles of Scilly I have considered the detailed business case of a merger with Dorset Police very carefully. I have scrutinised the proposal and considered its impacts both positive and negative. I have taken into account the Home Office guidance in the way that the business case has been put together, and considered the views of stakeholders across the area. Whilst there is a clear and articulate business case from an operational perspective as Police and Crime Commissioner I have a wider remit and responsibility to the community than the Police Forces and must make my decision cognisant of these wider responsibilities.

After much deliberation, I have concluded that although the Final Business Case does demonstrate that a merger is possible, I am unable to support it at this time due to my concerns around the council tax precept and the lack of public support for the proposals.

Throughout this process I have listened to the views of the Chief Constable, and understood the operational challenges presented by years of reduced funding. I have also listened carefully to the views of the community and other stakeholders – in my role as their elected representative in policing. I would like to thank them all for their valuable contributions, tireless efforts and commitment throughout the development of the business case.

Public and stakeholder engagement

The views of our communities are fundamental to me as the public's representative in policing and are therefore a key consideration in my decision. I have considered these as key factors in my decision and my desire to ensure that localism is at the heart of my connectivity agenda. The democratically elected leaderships of Plymouth and Cornwall are both not supportive of the merger proposal. These views are held across political parties in those areas – demonstrating a strong view from across the democratic representatives.

The views of the public through our merger engagement survey did not demonstrate to me that the public were sufficiently supportive of the proposal. Whilst the representative telephone survey is positive it is my view that we must consider all of the survey data – including the staff survey - in the round. The other three corporations sole are of the view that the representative telephone survey of 2053 people should be the focal point for consideration of the public's view. I do not agree that this is the case and have given equal weight in reaching my decision to the views expressed by all of the 7,403 respondents from Devon, Cornwall and the Isles of Scilly as opposed to the 1,430 who took part in the telephone survey.

Taking these points into account I do not consider that the required levels of public support are there for proceeding with a merger. This is one of the pre-requisites laid out for us by the Home Office.

Council Tax Precept

This brings me to the police precept element of Council Tax. Any merger would legally require the harmonisation of Council Tax across Cornwall, Devon and Dorset – and there is currently an £18 differential – with Dorset being higher.

In early 2018 I undertook a Council Tax precept Poll which 4109 people participated in with 86% saying that they believed policing needed more investment and 71% were willing to pay more to support that investment. I had hoped that the merger process would create further opportunities to raise revenue to continue that investment, but this is not the case. I have been particularly struck by the results of the merger engagement survey – with limited support being given to paying more council tax as part of the merger process.

I have always worked on the principle of if you pay more, you get more. However, the Home Office have been unable to give the necessary assurances that the council tax models developed would be acceptable to them, and I do not wish to expose the people of Devon and Cornwall to any unnecessary uncertainty about the future levels of precept rises, which would be outside of my control. I am grateful for the freedom that the government has given PCCs through the £12 precept uplift, which has already been agreed in principle by the Police and Crime Panel through the Medium Term Financial Plan.

I have taken account of local identity and accountability in reaching my decision. Connectivity has been my number one priority in Devon and Cornwall and the Isles of Scilly. The merger will not in itself increase connectivity in communities. This is compounded by the inability of the business case to fulfil our original aspiration of 430 extra officers across the area. The only investment we can make from the merger is 100 additional officers which would be across the three counties and I do not believe that the impact of 70 additional officers for Devon and Cornwall is enough to make the transition beneficial enough for the public and to overcome the lack of public support.

On balance I have come to the conclusion that the people of Devon, Cornwall and the Isles of Scilly are best served by the existing geographic Force, with a separate Chief Constable and Police and Crime Commissioner. While the business case stacks up operationally I am not convinced that the new model would best serve the residents of Devon, Cornwall and the Isles

of Scilly. The consideration for a merged force was never just about the financial case. Our strategic alliance with Dorset has derived many benefits. I consider that we should invest our energies into our existing alliances building our resilience and mutual aid arrangements with our local stakeholders and across the region.

I remain committed to serving the people of Devon and Cornwall in the best way possible, and thank all of those who have taken the time to give feedback throughout the process. I will now be re-focused on driving productivity within the Force and increasing connectivity.

Alison Hernandez

Police and Crime Commissioner for Devon, Cornwall and the Isles of Scilly

27 September 2018