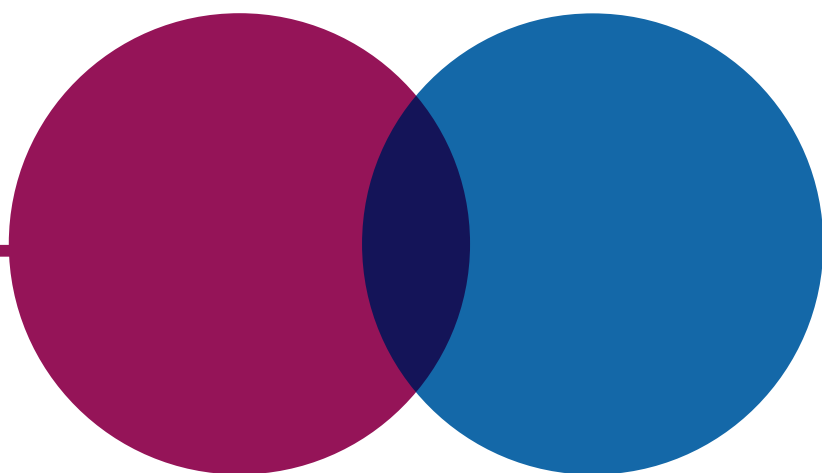




National Audit Office



REPORT

Police productivity

Home Office

SESSION 2024–2026
3 NOVEMBER 2025
HC 1380



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National Audit Office

Police productivity

Home Office

Report by the Comptroller and Auditor General

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Commons in accordance with Section 9 of the Act

Gareth Davies
Comptroller and Auditor General
National Audit Office

24 October 2025



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The National Audit Office study team consisted of:

Richard Baynham,
Honor Bouverie, Greg Hannah
and Rob Wilson, under the
direction of Oliver Lodge.

For further information about the National Audit Office please contact:

National Audit Office
Press Office
157–197 Buckingham Palace Road
Victoria
London
SW1W 9SP

 020 7798 7400

 www.nao.org.uk

 @NAOorguk

Key facts

43

territorial police forces in England and Wales, which are operationally independent and have control over their spending decisions

1.7%

annual average real-terms increase that the government expects in total police funding over 2025-26 to 2028-29

£354mn

of potential efficiency savings that the Home Office is targeting through the Police Efficiency and Collaboration Programme over 2025-26 to 2028-29

The financial pressure on police forces is growing

- £276 million** of financial reserves drawn down by police forces in 2024-25 to help balance their annual budgets
- 60%** of police capital programmes funded by borrowing in 2024-25, forecast to increase to 71% in 2025-26

The Home Office is supporting police forces to improve their financial sustainability

- £220 million** of efficiency savings that the Home Office reports police forces have achieved between 2020-21 and 2024-25
- 53%** of potential savings in the Police Efficiency and Collaboration Programme that the Home Office has assessed as 'high' or 'medium' delivery risk

The Home Office needs to address barriers to improving productivity

- 77%** estimated amount of police funding committed to staff pay, meaning police forces have limited flexibility to make capital investments and invest in new technologies
- £50 million** of funding to support productivity improvements and the rollout of new technologies in 2025-26, compared to £105 million in 2024-25

Summary

1 The role of the police is to maintain public safety and order, prevent crime and uphold the law. There are 43 territorial police forces in England and Wales, which are accountable to locally elected police and crime commissioners and mayors. While the Home Office has overall responsibility for police forces, individual forces are operationally independent. The Home Office allocates the majority of police funding and maintains a system of local accountability, including intervening if chief constables or police and crime commissioners fail to carry out their duties.

2 As part of its 'plan for change', the government is implementing the 'Safer Streets' mission – aiming to halve knife crime and violence against women and girls over the next decade and increase public confidence in the police. To achieve this, it has introduced the Neighbourhood Policing Guarantee, which aims to increase the number of police officers, police community support officers and special constables working in neighbourhood policing roles by 13,000 by 2029. The government also intends to deliver a programme of police reform and plans to publish a white paper in 2025.

3 To support its commitment to neighbourhood policing, the government expects to increase total police funding by an average of 1.7% per year in real terms over 2025-26 to 2028-29.¹ Policing received total funding of £19.9 billion in 2025-26. The Labour Party manifesto set out how the Neighbourhood Policing Guarantee would be paid for by tackling waste through a Police Efficiency and Collaboration Programme. The Home Office is still developing this Programme.

Focus of our report

4 We reported on the financial sustainability of police forces in 2018, concluding that the Home Office's 'light touch' approach to overseeing police forces meant it did not know if the police system was financially sustainable.² This report examines how the Home Office is supporting police forces to improve their productivity and long-term financial sustainability. It covers:

- the financial pressures facing policing (Part 1);
- the Home Office's approach to improving the financial sustainability of policing (Part 2); and
- what is needed to achieve lasting improvements in police productivity (Part 3).

¹ In the 2025 Spending Review, the government referred to 'core spending power' and explained that this refers to the projected total police settlement funding, including projected spend from additional income such as the estimated funding from the police council tax precept.

² Comptroller and Auditor General, *Financial sustainability of police forces in England and Wales 2018*, Session 2017-19, HC 1501, National Audit Office, September 2018, available at www.nao.org.uk/reports/financial-sustainability-of-police-forces-in-england-and-wales-2018/

5 Our report focuses on the role of the Home Office, as the responsible department, but we also consider the work of stakeholders such as the College of Policing and HM Inspectorate of Constabulary and Fire & Rescue Services. Responsibility for policing is devolved to the governments of Northern Ireland and Scotland. This report covers England and Wales.

Key findings

Financial pressures facing the police

6 Police forces are managing increasing financial pressures but, to-date, the Home Office has not fully understood the implications. In 2024-25, police forces responded to financial pressures by reducing their reserves by £276 million and borrowing £632 million to help fund capital programmes. These are short-term measures, which may affect their financial resilience in the future. To live within budgets, police forces have also run high levels of staff vacancies, used more officers in civilian roles and reprioritised the services they provide. Historically, the Home Office has relied on a system of local accountability and has lacked a national view of the impact of funding pressures, including on police services. It also distributes core funding for forces using the outdated police allocation formula, which was last revised in 2013 and does not consider the full range of demands facing police, the efficiency of forces or levels of financial reserves (paragraphs 1.3, 1.9 and 1.12 to 1.16).

7 The Home Office is strengthening its oversight of police forces but there are important gaps in its understanding. In 2018 we recommended that the Home Office make better use of data to monitor the financial resilience of police forces. It has focused previously on monitoring police workforce data but in 2025 sought to improve its understanding by re-assessing the financial resilience of forces. The Home Office is also adopting a more active role in overseeing police performance and driving improvements. It has created a Police Standards and Performance Improvement Directorate, is seeking to improve its data and is developing a performance dashboard to allow it to better understand variations across forces and support accountability. While these are positive steps, the Home Office is working from a low base and there are gaps in its data and understanding. It has not yet established consistent data on police costs and has limited understanding of why some forces are under greater financial stress (paragraphs 1.15, 1.17, 1.18, 2.10 and 3.3).

8 Fully funding the government's policing commitments while managing existing pressures will require police forces to make significant savings.

The demands on policing have increased in recent years, due to the changing nature of crime and police taking on additional responsibilities. Wider criminal justice reforms, such as the sentencing review and changes to probation, are predicted to further increase demand on the police. The Home Office and policing do not have a shared understanding of the resource implications of changing demands. As at September 2025, the Home Office had not yet allocated police funding for 2026-27 to 2028-29 but the projected average annual increase in total police funding of 1.7% is likely to be absorbed by pay increases and inflationary pressures. The Home Office is seeking to achieve efficiency savings through its Police Efficiency and Collaboration Programme to help fund the government's policing commitments, identifying potential savings of £354 million over 2025-26 to 2028-29. However, it has not yet agreed how it will support police forces to meet the Neighbourhood Policing Guarantee, or the funding implications of this. In October 2025, the Home Office was working to develop an affordable delivery model (paragraphs 1.8 to 1.11 and 3.24).

Improving the financial sustainability of policing

9 There is little evidence that the Home Office's previous efficiency initiatives have led to lasting improvements in working practices across all police forces.

The Home Office has required police forces to make efficiency savings by asking them to absorb reductions to their annual grant allocations. It funded transformation programmes and established BlueLight Commercial to help forces make savings. However, the Home Office does not fully understand what its programmes have achieved and has not systematically identified lessons. Its 2015 transformation programme cost £373 million, but by 2019-20 had only led to savings of £112 million. The Home Office reported it had achieved efficiency savings of £220 million over 2020-21 to 2024-25 but could only provide details to support £25 million in 2020-21 and did not know whether these have been sustained. BlueLight Commercial has consistently met its targets for achieving efficiency savings since 2020-21 through increasing the use of national frameworks and contracts. It reported that it had achieved £112 million of direct benefits up to 2024-25. While this has supported efficiency improvements, take-up is voluntary and procurement practices across police forces have not fundamentally changed (paragraphs 2.1 to 2.4 and 2.13).

10 The Home Office's planned efficiency savings programme for police forces will be challenging to achieve. The Home Office consulted extensively with police stakeholders – including BlueLight Commercial and the National Police Chiefs' Council – to assess the scope for efficiency savings. It is targeting potential savings of up to £354 million over 2025-26 to 2028-29 through its Police Efficiency and Collaboration Programme. As at September 2025, the Home Office had not yet decided how to meet this ambition. It had assessed over half of these savings as 'high' or 'medium' risk and had not established what funding is available to deliver the potential savings. The scope to achieve savings also varies across police forces – who are under no obligation to use national frameworks – and some of the potential savings may require new legislation. (paragraphs 2.7 to 2.9).

11 The Home Office has focused on achieving cashable savings but there is significant potential to improve police productivity. It is focusing on achieving cashable efficiency savings to help fund the government's policing commitments, while considering wider police reforms. There have been previous efforts to improve productivity, but these have not been sustained. For example, in 2023, the Policing Productivity Review made 26 recommendations to improve police productivity, identifying the potential to save 38 million hours of police time over five years. The previous government set out its approach to implementing the Review, with a focus on new technology, and the Home Office has supported its implementation. However, HM Treasury withdrew investment funding that was originally provided to help implement the Review and improve productivity from 2025-26, and there has been limited progress in achieving the potential benefits. In 2024-25, the Home Office allocated £105 million to support the rollout of new technologies across police forces to help transform working practices, but has reduced this to £50 million in 2025-26. There is also potential for significant productivity improvements from streamlining police processes and managing demand. The College of Policing plans to issue a diagnostic tool for police forces to self-diagnose and identify opportunities to increase productivity (paragraphs 2.13 to 2.15 and 3.20).

Improving police productivity

12 The Home Office has not yet established an approach to measuring police productivity. We reported in 2015 and 2018 that the Home Office had limited data and analysis of police productivity. It does not yet have an agreed definition of productivity, nor a standard methodology for measuring it. The Home Office is working with the Office for National Statistics to define the activities to be measured and identify the data needed. The College of Policing is also developing a productivity methodology focusing on crime response, public safety and crime prevention. It aims to allow forces to assess how productivity has changed over time, although it is not designed to support comparisons between forces. The data necessary to build an understanding of productivity are also fragmented and inconsistent. To help achieve improvements in productivity, the Home Office will need to develop reliable measures on the relative productivity of forces and identify the drivers of improved productivity (paragraphs 3.1 to 3.4).

13 The planned police reforms present an opportunity to address some of the structural barriers to improving police productivity. There are many examples of individual police forces adopting new approaches and using technology to improve performance, but, overall, the roll-out and adoption of new initiatives at a national level has been slow. The government's planned reforms, including the creation of a National Centre of Policing, have the potential to address some of the barriers to improving productivity. While implementing these reforms will take time, we have identified the main barriers to improving productivity (paragraphs 3.5 to 3.21).

- An insufficient understanding of how new working practices could benefit forces due to inconsistent evaluations of pilots and lack of evidence on benefits.
- Slow progress in adopting new approaches due to the absence of a framework for scaling innovation, short-term funding allocations and insufficient focus on embedding changes.
- The lack of standardisation across the 43 forces and absence of collective decision-making has discouraged the adoption of new technologies, led to duplication of working practices and weakened forces' negotiating position with suppliers.
- The government's focus on maintaining officer numbers means police forces have less flexibility in how they use resources and often do not have the capabilities needed to support transformation programmes and embed new technology. Police officers' terms of employment also restrict forces' flexibility and means they are more likely to reduce their civilian staff to make savings.
- Insufficient exploitation of digital and AI opportunities. The adoption of new digital technologies is critical to improving the productivity of policing. The Home Office has not yet determined the level of funding available from 2025-26. The complex governance and delivery arrangements can also lead to a lack of prioritisation and insufficient support for rolling out technology with the greatest potential.

14 The Home Office and other departments do not always have a shared understanding of the impact of wider policy decisions on police resources. While the government's collective decision-making process means that the implications of wider policy decisions on policing are considered, there is more limited analysis of the impact on police resources. For example, the 2025 Independent Sentencing Review acknowledges possible implications for policing but does not quantify the impact of additional demands. The Home Office has assessed the potential impact of the Neighbourhood Policing Guarantee on the criminal justice system but has recognised there is scope for more detailed assessments of the impact of policy changes on policing and other parts of government (paragraphs 3.24 to 3.25).

Conclusion on value for money

15 The pressures facing policing are growing and current approaches to managing these pressures risk damaging the services that police forces provide. Improving the productivity of the police is crucial to helping them manage financial pressures while supporting their ability to respond to changing demands. The Home Office's previous attempts to improve efficiency and productivity have not led to sustainable long-term change across the 43 police forces. A limited understanding of what works, lack of standardisation across forces and patchy adoption of digital technology have all hampered the pursuit of greater productivity.

16 We have previously identified the risks inherent in a 'light touch' approach to overseeing the policing system, and the Home Office is now adopting a stronger central role in overseeing the resilience and performance of the police. It is working to better understand the challenges facing police and is shortly to publish a white paper on police reform. While any structural changes may take time, there are steps the Home Office can take now to lead the policing system to address the barriers to productivity and support better value for money from police funding.

Recommendations

17 These recommendations are intended to support the Home Office in addressing the barriers to improving police productivity.

On improving the Home Office's oversight of the financial stress facing police forces:

- a** The Home Office should build on its recent analysis of police forces' financial resilience to improve its understanding of the scale and causes of financial stress and risks faced by forces. To achieve this, it should:
 - agree a standardised template with policing to collect consistent and timely financial and performance data, focusing on key risk indicators; and
 - repeat its financial resilience work and compare forces with similar characteristics to help identify the root causes of financial stress, including developing a view on variations in financial management capability across forces.

- b** The Home Office should work with the NPCC and other key policing partners to conduct horizon scanning to identify potential changes that might affect policing, including changes at the local government level. Where potential new demands are identified, it should ensure that the potential impact is quantified and based on reliable data.

On improving the financial sustainability of policing:

- c** In taking forward its plans for police reform, the Home Office should review its approach to funding forces. It should use this review to set out a trajectory for moving to a funding approach that takes account of forces' current operational context and their capacity to meet the full range of government priorities. It could consider, for example, the proportion of funding that commissioners receive from local taxation, levels of demand, the relative efficiency of forces and levels of financial resilience.
- d** To achieve more ambitious savings and embed new working practices to improve police productivity, the Home Office should develop and embed an evaluation strategy in the Police Efficiency and Collaboration Programme. It should establish a programme of portfolio, thematic and longer-term evaluations to identify areas with the greatest potential to harness opportunities to improve police efficiency and productivity, and identify the conditions needed to achieve lasting changes in working practices across the 43 police forces.

On improving police productivity:

- e** The Home Office should build on its work to better understand the factors influencing police performance and productivity, by:
 - establishing what aspects of police productivity are most relevant to the overall objectives it has set for policing;
 - bringing relevant data together to provide consistent, up-to-date data to better measure productivity within forces, including re-running the police activity survey; and
 - incorporating productivity measures into its framework for measuring police performance.

- f** The Home Office should support police forces to accelerate the benefits from adopting innovative practices and technology by:
 - working with the College of Policing and other stakeholders to:
 - strengthen its evaluation of potential new working practices and technologies to provide better information to police forces on the benefits, risks and practical steps needed to support adoption; and
 - roll out the new diagnostic tool in 2026-27 to all 43 police forces to test the potential to streamline police processes and make better use of data and analytics to manage demand.
 - working with police forces to conduct an audit of the skills required to enable faster implementation of new technologies and use of AI;
 - consolidating existing funding streams and reviewing mechanisms to support longer-term funding commitments; and
 - reviewing the feasibility of greater mandation to increase standardisation across police forces in order to create the conditions for more efficient procurement and adoption of new working practices.

Part One

The financial resilience of the police

Responsibilities of policing

1.1 There are 43 territorial police forces in England and Wales. Each force is led by a chief constable who is operationally independent.³ The chief constable reports to a police and crime commissioner (PCC) or a mayor, who is accountable for policing within their area.⁴ PCCs have the legal power and duty to set the force's strategic direction and objectives,⁵ decide the budget, hold the chief constable to account and maintain an efficient and effective police force.

1.2 The Home Office is ultimately responsible for policing, including maintaining a system of local accountability, assessing and allocating funding, intervening if chief constables or PCCs fail to carry out their duties and identifying opportunities and providing support for forces to work efficiently. The Home Secretary can direct forces in exceptional circumstances,⁶ including to compel forces to collaborate or to specify equipment provision. In practice, former home secretaries have only used these powers rarely, for example to set standards on police equipment in 2011 and to mandate collaboration, for example on the National Police Air Service in 2012.

1.3 The Home Office relies on a system of local accountability to provide assurance on the use of annual funding allocations and quality of services (**Figure 1** on pages 14 to 16). Police forces are subject to independent inspection by HM Inspectorate of Constabulary and Fire & Rescue Services (HMICFRS). The College of Policing is the professional body for policing in England and Wales and its responsibilities include identifying and promoting good practice across police forces.⁷ The Home Office also provides funding to bodies such as the National Police Chiefs' Council (NPCC) and the College of Policing, and has established separate arrangements to provide assurance over the use of this funding.

³ London has a Metropolitan Police Commissioner rather than a chief constable.

⁴ Five police forces in England are governed by a mayor who holds PCC functions. City of London Police does not have a PCC.

⁵ These are set out in a Police and Crime Plan.

⁶ In January 2012, the Policing Protocol Order 2011 came into force, setting the roles and responsibilities of PCCs, chief constables, police and crime panels and the Home Secretary. It set out that the Home Secretary has reserved powers that enable intervention and direction of all parties in policing, which can be used if it is determined that action is necessary to prevent or mitigate risk to the public or national security. In 2023, the Order was refreshed to make clear that this would only happen in line with statutory tests and public law principles.

⁷ The full responsibilities of the College of Policing are: setting curricula and professional frameworks for police education, leadership and development; setting operational and ethical standards; and identifying and promoting good practice across forces.

Figure 1
Police force accountability arrangements in England and Wales

Police forces have local accountability arrangements

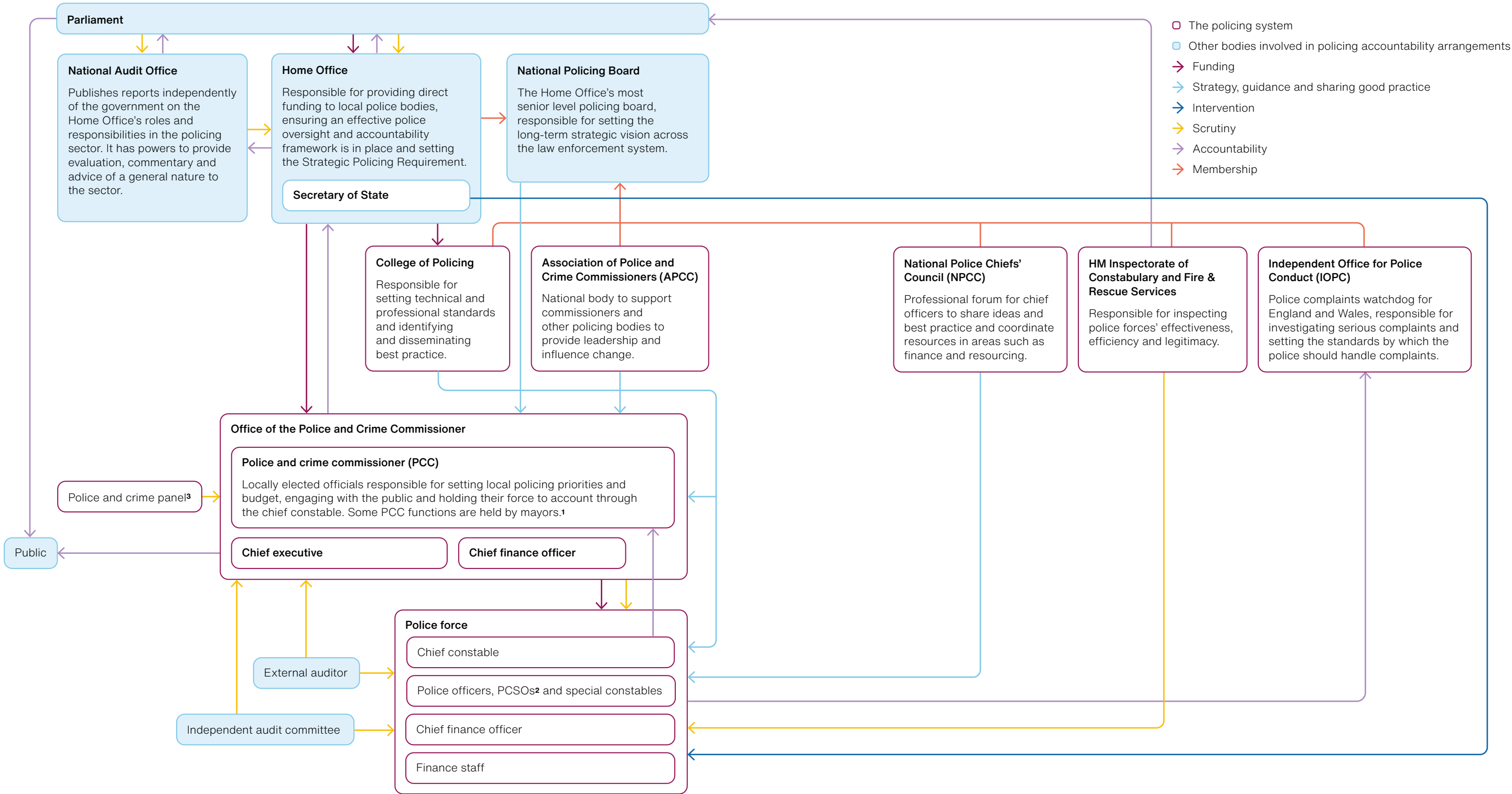


Figure 1 *continued*

Police force accountability arrangements in England and Wales

Notes

- 1 In five police force areas, London, Greater Manchester, North Yorkshire, South Yorkshire, and West Yorkshire, PCC functions are undertaken by the mayor.
- 2 PCSOs are police community support officers.
- 3 Police and crime panels are non-executive bodies that provide both challenge and support to police and crime commissioners by reviewing whether they are achieving their police and crime plans. They meet publicly to enable the public to hold their commissioner to account.

Source: National Audit Office analysis

1.4 As part of its *Plan for Change*, the government is implementing its ‘*Safer Streets*’ mission – aiming to halve knife crime and violence against women and girls over the next decade and increase public confidence in policing and the criminal justice system. As part of this, it has made the following commitments.

- **The Neighbourhood Policing Guarantee**, which aims to increase the number of police officers, police community support officers (PCSOs) and special constables working in neighbourhood policing roles. This includes 3,000 additional personnel by 31 March 2026 and 13,000 by 2029. Not all of these personnel will be newly recruited as forces will be able to redeploy personnel from other roles. Where a force can make the case, funding can be provided for the recruitment of civilian staff to enable officers to be redeployed into neighbourhood policing roles.
- **Changes to how police performance is overseen**, with the Home Office taking on a more active role.⁸
- **Implementing the Police Efficiency and Collaboration Programme** to deliver efficiency savings through collaborative procurement, cost recovery, increased productivity and improved data – and the creation of a national police body to drive greater standardisation and coherence between forces.

⁸ This includes establishing a Police Standards and Performance Improvement Directorate and developing a new police performance framework.

Police funding

1.5 In 2025-26, policing received £19.9 billion of funding, a 17% real-terms increase since 2018-19 (**Figure 2** overleaf). Of this, PCCs received £17.7 billion to distribute to their forces in line with local priorities and objectives. PCCs receive funding from:

- central government (£11.6 billion in 2025-26) – the core grant⁹ (£9.6 billion in 2025-26) is allocated to forces using the police allocation formula, which uses a range of indicators to measure the relative need for policing in different areas. Forces also receive other government funding (£2 billion), such as council tax grants¹⁰ and ring-fenced grants (including the neighbourhood policing grant);
- police precept (£6.1 billion in 2025-26) – forces raise additional revenue through council tax contributions; and
- other sources – charging for services to recover costs, such as policing festivals or sporting events, and income from donations and sponsorship.

1.6 While funding to PCCs (£17.7 billion) increased in real terms by 20% between 2018-19 and 2025-26, the core grant (£9.6 billion) only increased by 6% due to an increasing amount of funding being allocated to ringfenced initiatives. For example, in 2025-26 forces received £270 million through the officer maintenance grant (which forces are only eligible for if they meet their headcount targets), £107 million of additional recruitment top-up grant, and £200 million to grow neighbourhood policing.

1.7 In 2025-26, PCCs received £6.1 billion from the policing precept, a real terms increase of 28% (£1.3 billion) since 2018-19. The proportion of police funding from the precept varies widely across forces because of differences in council tax levels and the value and number of properties, which affects how much council tax is collected.¹¹ In 2025-26, the precept is expected to make up 54% of Surrey Police's funding compared to 20% of Northumbria's.

1.8 The 2025 Spending Review set out police funding plans until 2028-29. To support front-line policing levels and the government's commitment to neighbourhood policing, the government increased police 'core spending power' by an average of 1.7% per year over 2025-26 to 2028-29 (real terms).¹² This is based on projections of additional income and assumes PCCs increase the precept by the maximum amount allowed.

⁹ The core government grant is made up of core Home Office grant funding, ex-Department for Communities and Local Government formula grant, and Welsh government funding.

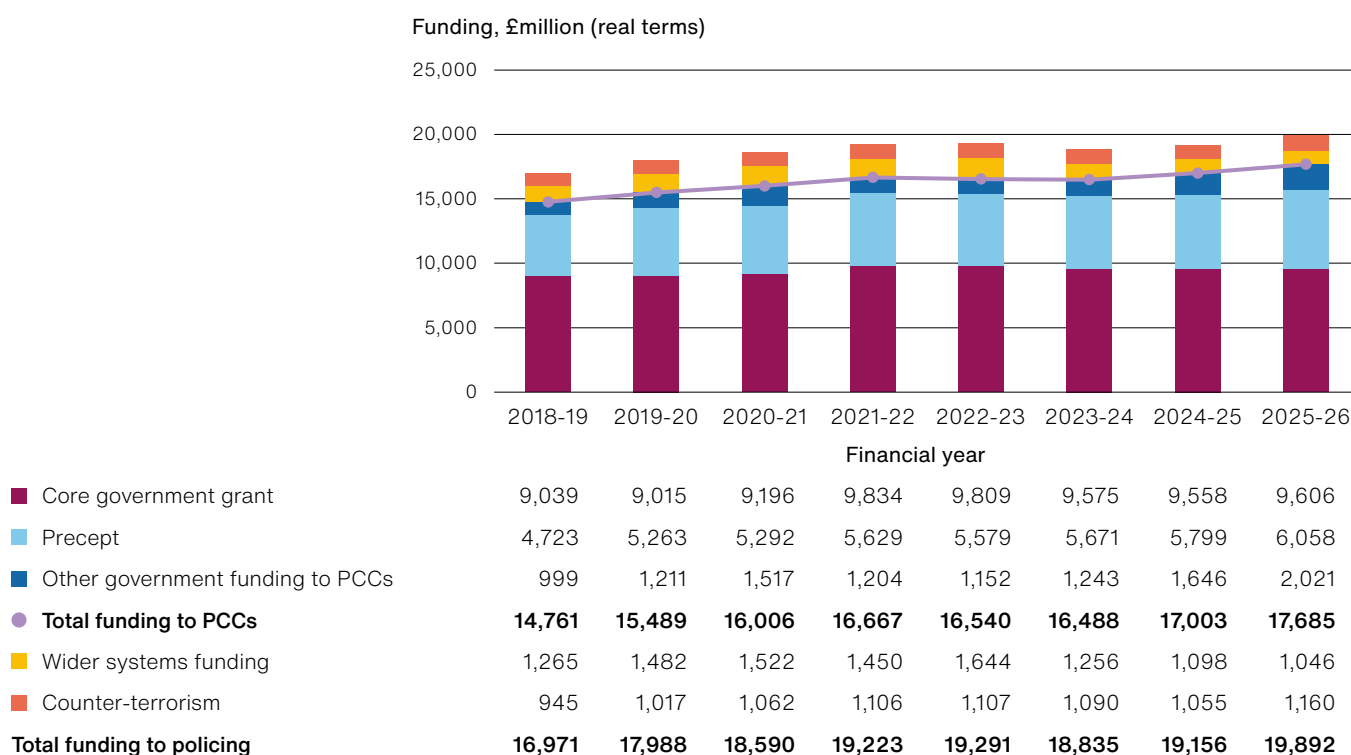
¹⁰ Council tax grants include Legacy Council Tax freeze grants and Local Council Tax support grants.

¹¹ The City of London is unable to raise precept and, since 2018-19, has received a precept grant in recognition of this.

¹² Police core spending power refers to the projected total police settlement including counter terrorism funding. This includes projected spending from additional income, including estimated funding from the police council tax precept.

Figure 2

Police funding by funding source, 2018-19 to 2025-26

Funding to PCCs increased by 20% (in real terms) between 2018-19 and 2025-26**Notes**

- Figures are in real terms based on 2025-26 prices.
- PCCs are police and crime commissioners.
- Core government grant is made up of core Home Office grant funding, ex-Department for Communities and Local Government formula grant, and Welsh government funding.
- Precept is funding police forces collect locally through council tax contributions.
- Other government funding to PCCs includes council tax grants (Legacy Council Tax freeze grants and Local Council Tax support grants), pensions grant, national insurance contributions and ringfenced grants. Up to and including 2021-22 it also included the police capital grant which provided direct capital funding to forces.
- Wider system funding covers national priorities, such as police technology programmes, special grant funding, Serious Violence Strategy funding, regional and organised crime units, National Police Chiefs' Council programmes, arm's-length bodies and police aviation. National priorities vary each year.
- Values may not sum to total due to rounding.

Source: National Audit Office analysis of Home Office police funding data

1.9 The NPCC has warned that funding increases will cover little more than the annual inflationary pay increases for officers and staff. In 2025 the government announced a 4.2% pay increase for all police ranks up to chief superintendents. The rising cost of police pensions, increasing average officer costs and inflationary pressures are also expected to absorb the increases in funding. The NPCC has estimated that the cumulative budget deficit across the 43 forces could increase from £0.4 billion in 2025-26 to £0.6 billion in 2028-29. The Home Office highlighted that this forecast is dependent on assumptions on future funding allocations and cost pressures that are uncertain, and does not include potential efficiency savings. Other funding challenges include the following:

- **Neighbourhood policing commitments.** The government provided £200 million in 2025-26 to support police forces to deliver an additional 3,000 police officers, PCSOs and special constables into neighbourhood policing roles by 31 March 2026. As at September 2025, the government had not committed further funding for 2026-27 to 2028-29. The Labour Party manifesto set out how the Neighbourhood Policing Guarantee would be paid for by tackling waste through a Police Efficiency and Collaboration Programme. In 2025, the Home Office estimated potential efficiency savings of £354 million over 2025-26 to 2028-29. It has not yet agreed how it will support police forces to meet the Neighbourhood Policing Guarantee, or the funding implications of this. It is undertaking further work to develop an affordable delivery model.
- **Levels of committed funding.** As forces spend around 77% of their funding on officer and staff pay,¹³ they have limited flexibility to make capital investments; for example to maintain estates, replace vehicles and equipment, support transformation or invest in technology to improve productivity. The Home Office allocates some capital funding for national priorities but not specifically for forces' capital programmes.
- **Outdated funding model.** The core government grant accounted for 83% of central government funding to PCCs in 2025-26. The Home Office calculates how much core funding each force gets using the police allocation formula,¹⁴ which was last revised in 2013. In 2015, the Committee of Public Accounts concluded that the formula did not consider the full range of demands on police time, the efficiency of forces, levels of financial reserves held, or the proportion of funding that forces receive from central government relative to local funding. **Figure 3** on pages 20 and 21 shows that as population has increased, the level of total government funding per person has decreased. The Committee recommended that, in 2016-17, the Home Office should introduce a new formula but the Home Office has not yet revised the formula.

¹³ This calculation is based on salary cost data from 2023-24.

¹⁴ The police allocation formula uses various data sources to predict the relative need for police activities based on socio-economic and demographic factors.

Figure 3

Percentage change in total government funding per capita for police forces, compared with the change in population for the area, 2015-16 to 2023-24

Police forces in England and Wales with a higher population growth have seen larger decreases in the amount of government funding per capita

Percentage change in total government funding per capita, between 2015-16 and 2023-24

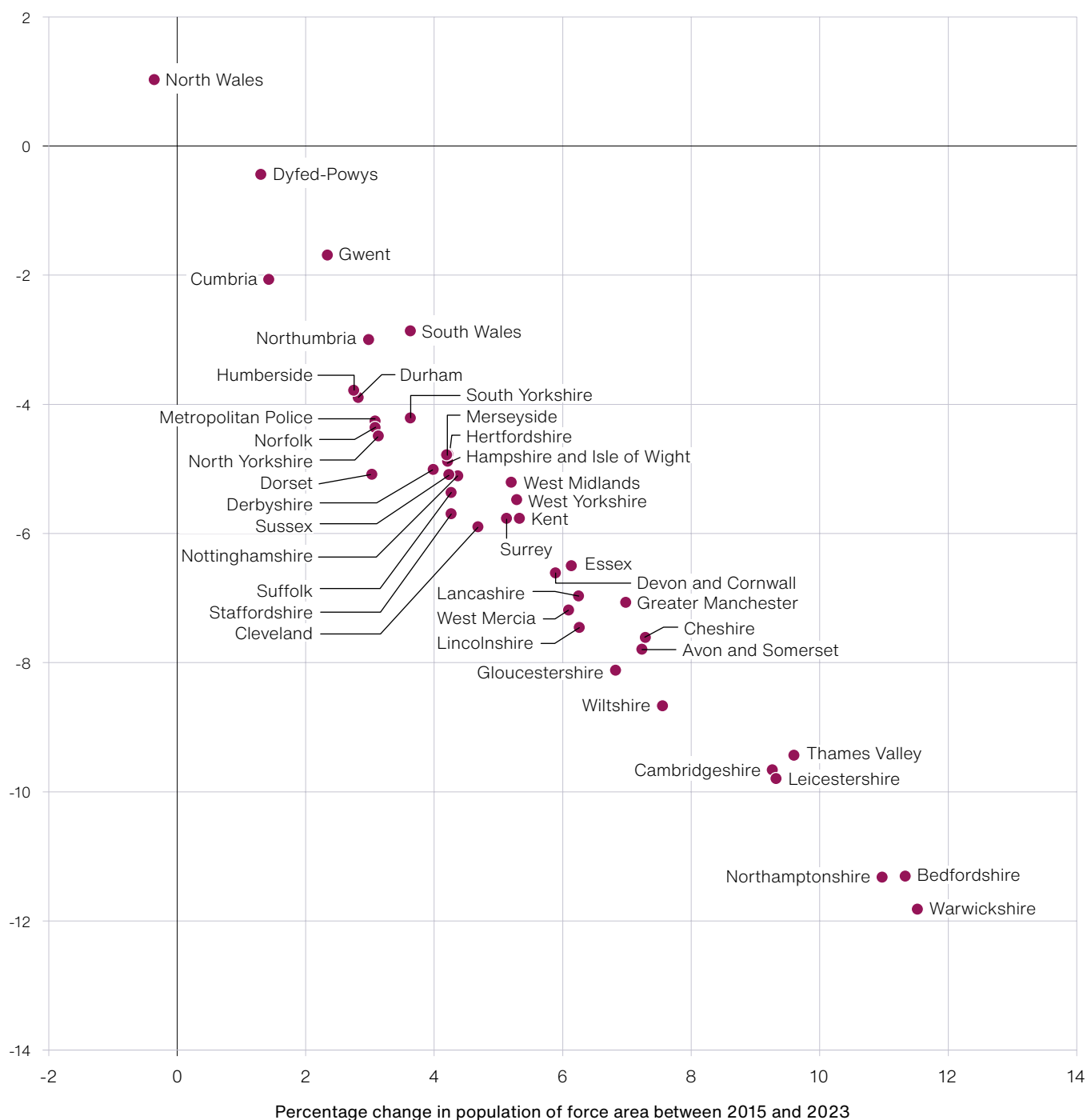


Figure 3 *continued*

Percentage change in total government funding per capita for police forces, compared with the change in population for the area, 2015-16 to 2023-24

Notes

- 1 City of London Police has been omitted from the figure since it could not be illustrated clearly on the same scale. Between 2015 and 2023, City of London Police had a population increase of 53% and a government funding per capita decrease of 28%.
- 2 Government funding consists both of resource funding (core grant funding, council tax grants, National and International Capital City grants, pensions grant, Police Uplift Programme grant) and, for 2015-16, the police capital grant. In 2023-24, 89% of government funding was made up by the core grant allocated through the police allocation formula.
- 3 Population numbers for 2015 and 2023 are based on mid-year estimates for England and Wales.

Source: National Audit Office analysis of Home Office population and funding data

Changing demands on policing

1.10 The demands on police forces are changing.

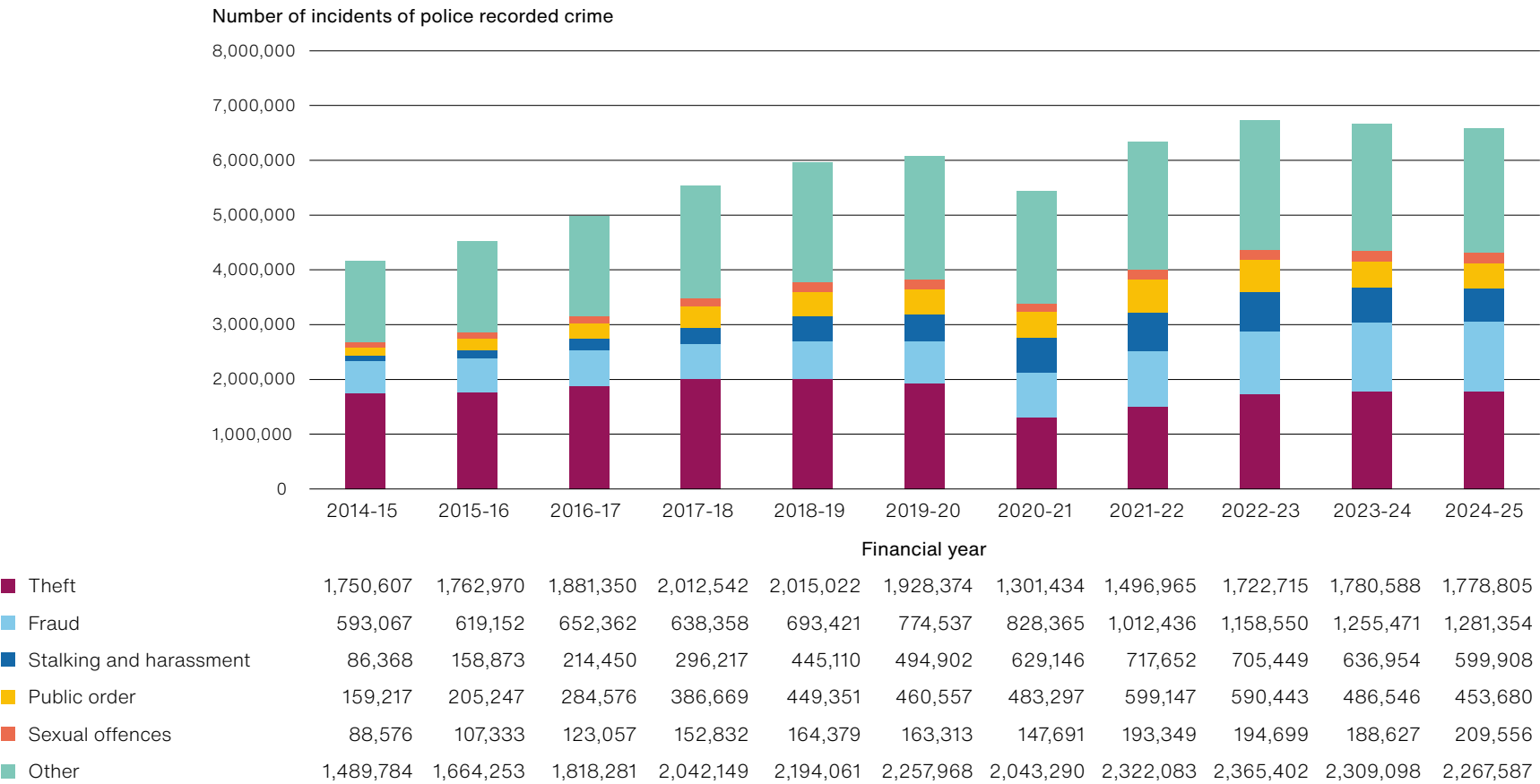
- **Changing nature of crime.** The proportion of recorded crime that is theft has decreased from 42% in 2014-15 to 27% in 2024-25. There has been a corresponding increase in fraud, sexual offences and stalking and harassment (**Figure 4** overleaf), which can be more complex and require specialist resources to investigate. Police forces are also responding to government priorities to halve knife crime and violence against women and girls.
- **Increasing responsibilities.** New powers, such as the amendment to the Dangerous Dogs Act – which granted police powers to seize XL Bully dogs and enforce public safety rules – have increased demands, with the NPCC estimating this will cost between £10 million and £20 million per year. Policing will also be affected by criminal justice reforms and changes to the probation service. With the probation service expected to scale back supervision of low-risk offenders, policing is expected to face additional demand.
- **Training requirements.** Police forces have raised concerns about the amount of police officers' time spent training in response to new regulations. For example, one police force identified that new protection and safety training and a neighbourhood policing course would consume 4,600 officer days in 2025-26. The NPCC also estimated that the number of training days in East Midlands forces increased by 59% between 2022 and 2024. The College of Policing is working with forces to help deliver the training.
- **Non-crime activity.** The 2023 Home Office police activity survey found that 65% of officer and police staff time was spent on activity not related to a specific crime incident.¹⁵ This covers time related to visible patrol, crime prevention work and training, plus public safety and welfare activities such as highway disruption and civil disputes. Public protests have also increased demand; there were 3,081 protests between June and August 2025 compared to 928 during the same period in 2023.

¹⁵ The police activity survey was conducted in February 2023 where officers and staff (excluding corporate functions) recorded how they spent their time over the period. The Home Office received responses from 35 of 43 police forces. Non-crime incident activities include public safety and welfare activities and activities not related to a specific incident.

Figure 4

Trends in categories of police recorded crime, 2014-15 to 2024-25

In 2014-15, theft made up 42% of police recorded crime, but recent increases in wider categories of crime mean it represented 27% of police recorded crime in 2024-25



Notes

- 1 Police recorded crime statistics based on data from all 43 forces in England and Wales (including the British Transport Police).
- 2 Police recorded crime figures have improved in accuracy over the last decade. Changes in recording practices and counting rules have affected the recording of stalking and harassment offences so this category should be interpreted with caution.
- 3 The figure illustrates the change in categories of crime that police face.
- 4 'Other' includes offences coming under violence against the person (excluding stalking and harassment), robbery, criminal damage, drug offences, possession of weapons, and miscellaneous crimes against society.
- 5 Fraud offences include offences recorded by Action Fraud and offences referred to the National Fraud Intelligence Bureau.

Source: National Audit Office analysis of police recorded crime

1.11 Understanding the demand on police services is important as it dictates the resources and skills required by forces. The Home Office and policing do not have a shared understanding of the resource implications of changing demands. The Home Office has assessed the costs of some specific policy changes, such as the 2025 police vetting regulations, but it does not consistently assess additional demands placed on policing. Its assessments are also limited by the lack of reliable activity and cost data, which weakens its ability to understand the impact of new demands. In contrast, NHS England seeks to understand service costs at the patient level and feeds this into the National Cost Collection Index to measure the relative efficiency of NHS organisations. The Home Office has not committed to regularly re-running the police activity survey due to the burden on forces, although this would help improve data. Some police forces forecast demand, but HMICFRS found that there was a lack of robust supporting data and consistent methodology. The NPCC has also estimated the cost of some of the new demands on policing.

Responses to financial pressures

1.12 Police forces have responded to financial pressures by drawing on financial reserves, increasing their borrowing and seeking to generate additional income.

- Thirty-six forces drew down a total of £276 million of financial reserves¹⁶ to help balance their annual budgets in 2024-25 (**Figure 5** overleaf). PCCs hold reserves in two forms: general reserves, which are used as a contingency fund to protect budgets against financial uncertainty, and earmarked reserves which are set aside for specific initiatives. Home Office analysis of forces' financial plans shows that total reserves were £1.5 billion in 2024-25 and projected to fall by 35% to £0.99 billion in 2027-28.¹⁷ This is driven by a reduction in earmarked reserves, which are forecast to reduce by 48% between 2024-25 and 2027-28.
- Forces have increased their borrowing to help fund capital programmes. In 2024-25, forces funded 60% of their capital programmes from borrowing (£632 million) but this is predicted to increase to 71% of capital spending in 2025-26. Forces will need to cover increased debt repayments in the future. In 2025-26, forces allocated 2% of their net revenue spending to capital financing costs, and this is expected to increase to almost 3% by 2027-28.
- Forces are seeking to generate additional income, such as recovering financial crime assets and increasing cost recovery. For example, over the 2024-25 football season, the Metropolitan Police spent £23 million policing football matches, with clubs contributing just 9% of this cost.

¹⁶ These data represent the net amount taken from reserves as a total across both general reserves and earmarked reserves.

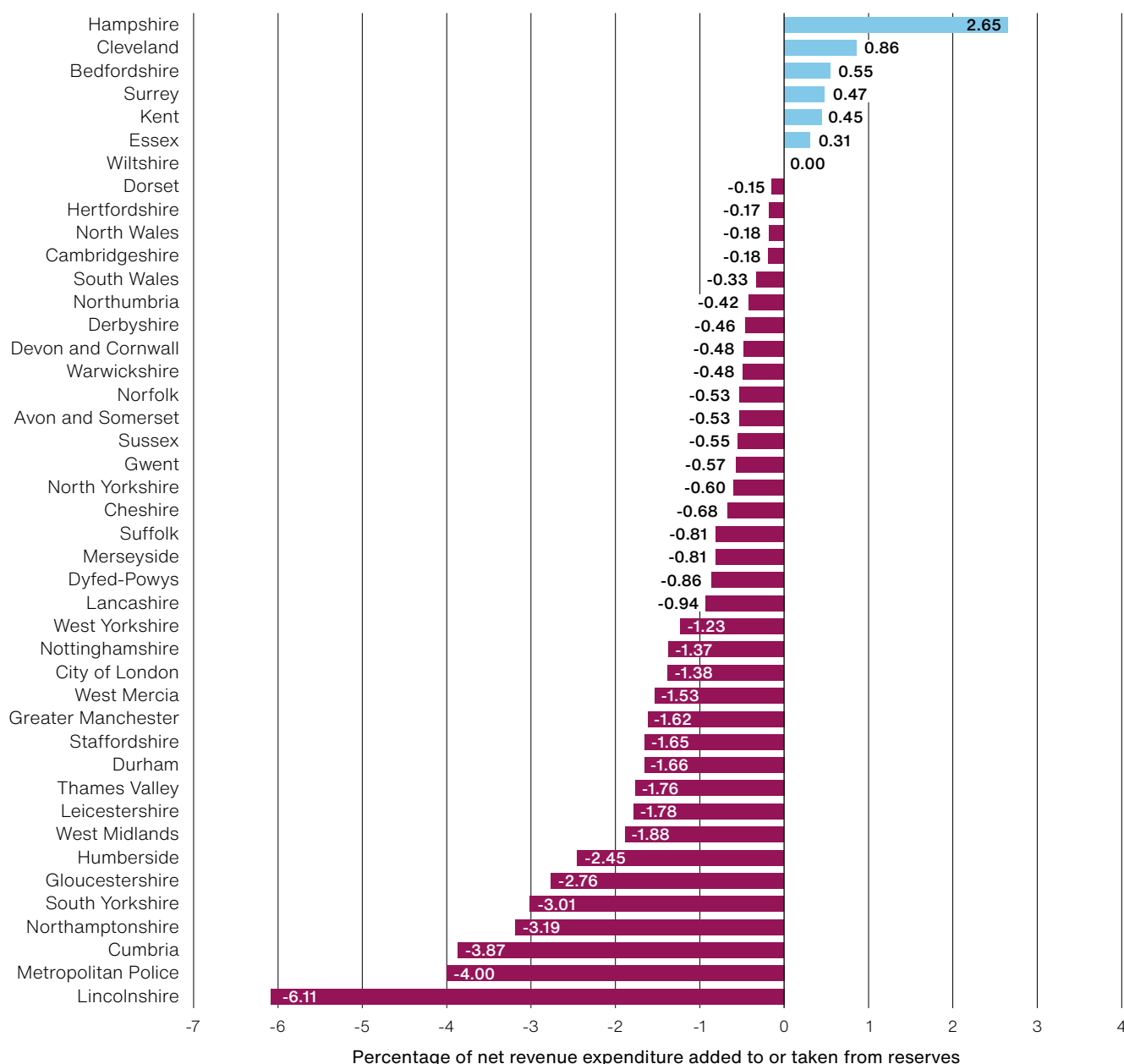
¹⁷ Each police force publishes their reserves strategy setting out their plan for their reserves and how the reserves will be used to improve services to the public.

Figure 5

Police force use of financial reserves as a proportion of net revenue expenditure, 2024-25

In 2024-25, 36 police forces in England and Wales took from their financial reserves and six forces added to their financial reserves

Police force



■ Percentage of net revenue expenditure taken from reserves ■ Percentage of net revenue expenditure added to reserves

Note

1 Police and crime commissioners hold reserves for forces in two forms: general reserves (which are used as a contingency fund to protect budgets against financial uncertainty) and earmarked reserves (which are set aside for specific initiatives). In this figure, the use of reserves considers the total added to or taken from reserves across both general reserves and earmarked reserves.

Source: National Audit Office analysis of HM Inspectorate of Constabulary and Fire & Rescue Service data

1.13 Police forces cannot become insolvent, run deficits or borrow to fund revenue spending. They must set balanced annual budgets, ensure there are adequate reserves and issue a report if the PCC needs to spend more in a financial year than is covered by available resources. The Home Office has provided emergency support of £123 million to five forces since 2023-24 to help them manage annual budgetary pressures and absorb additional demands. The majority was paid to the Metropolitan Police in 2024-25 to help address budget pressures, including the increased costs of policing protests.

1.14 Forces have also responded to financial pressures by changing their workforce mix, not recruiting to fill vacancies and making staff redundant. The government's focus on recruiting police officers, and linking some funding to recruitment, has led to the increased use of police officers in roles that do not require a warranted officer, with reductions in civilian staff in some forces to help balance budgets. The number of PCSOs decreased by 37% between 2015 and 2024 and the number of officers in support function roles, such as human resources, has increased by 42% since 2019 (**Figure 6** overleaf). Police forces are also operating with high vacancy levels and freezing staff recruitment. In 2025-26, the average vacancy rate for police forces is 7%, with some forces exceeding 10%.

1.15 Financial pressures mean that police forces need to make operational decisions about the level of policing service they provide. Given its previous 'light-touch' approach to monitoring, the Home Office does not have a full understanding of the impact of funding pressures on these operational decisions and priorities. Its monitoring has previously focused on police workforce data, including officer numbers and the workforce mix of forces. While police forces have operational independence, they must have regard to the Strategic Policing Requirement.¹⁸ Police forces and PCCs work together to ensure they have the capabilities and resources to counter national threats. The Home Office has identified that forces have an inconsistent approach to implementing national capabilities, such as the national forensics strategy, due to local discretion to interpret and adopt national priorities and data sharing challenges.

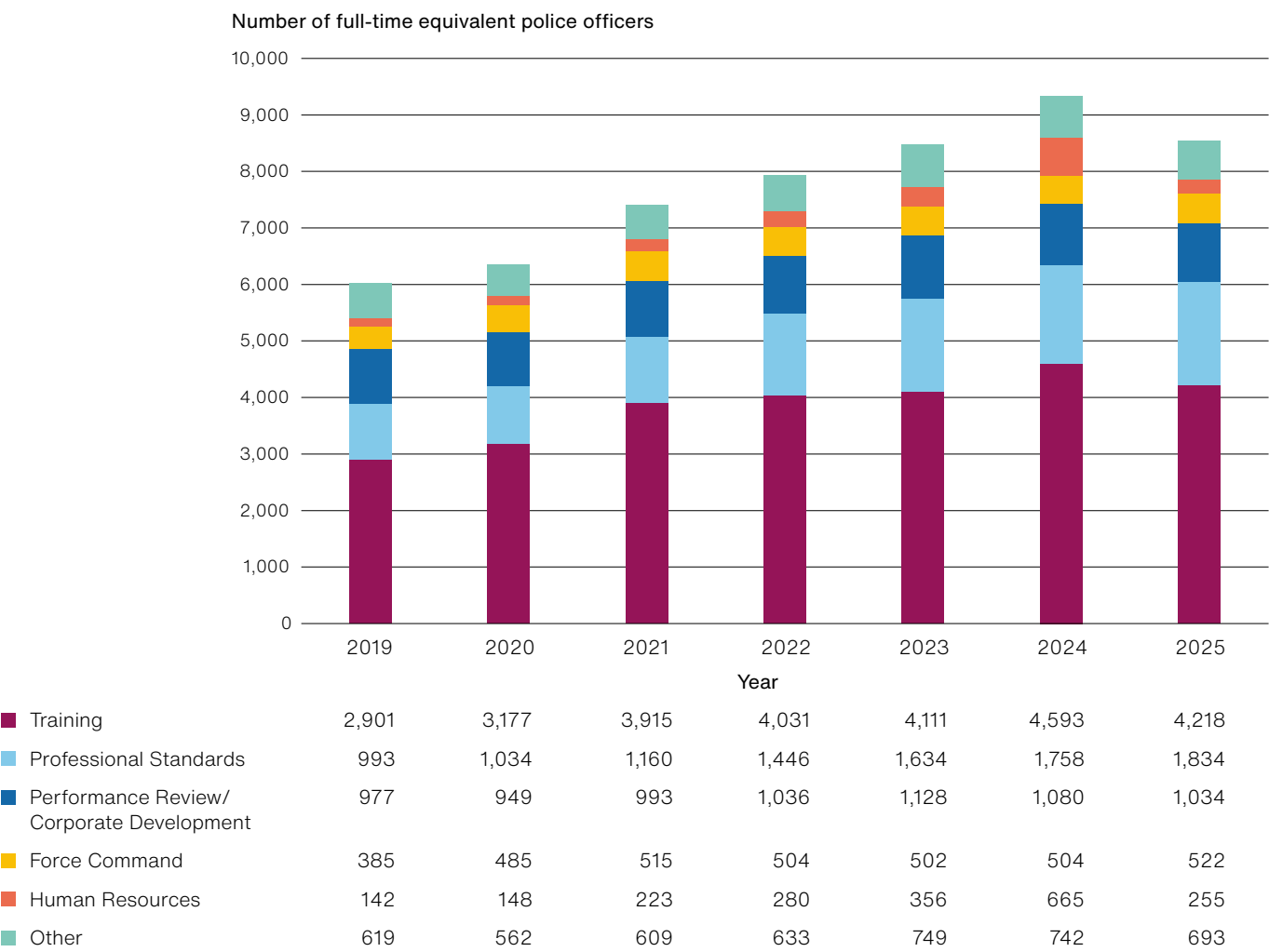
1.16 HMICFRS assesses the performance of forces locally by carrying out police efficiency, effectiveness and legitimacy (PEEL) inspections. Each force is graded against a range of criteria, which are adapted to reflect changing priorities in policing, and the inspections provide information on how forces are performing.¹⁹ These assessments cover a range of criteria on force performance, including investigating crime, leadership and force management. The most recent assessments showed that 12 of 43 forces were rated as inadequate in at least one of the performance criteria and 37 forces had at least one area that required improvement.

¹⁸ This is a statement from the Home Secretary outlining the national threats that require a collective policing response, such as terrorism, serious and organised crime, child sexual abuse, public disorder, national cyber incidents and civil emergencies.

¹⁹ PEEL assessments assess a range of topics including preventing and deterring crime, responding to the public, protecting vulnerable people, and leadership and force management. Forces are rated from 'Inadequate' to 'Outstanding' on a five-point scale.

Figure 6
Number of police officers in support function roles, 2019 to 2025

The number of police officers in England and Wales in support function roles in 2025 has increased by 42% since 2019



- Notes**
- 1 'Other' includes support function roles where fewer officers are present, including administration support, legal services and finance.
 - 2 Police officers with multiple roles are recorded under their primary function.
 - 3 Data are taken at 31 March each year.

Source: National Audit Office analysis of police workforce data

Home Office oversight

1.17 In our 2018 report on the financial sustainability of police forces, we concluded that the Home Office's light touch approach meant it did not have enough information to understand the financial pressures on forces and we recommended that the Home Office make better use of data to monitor forces' financial resilience.²⁰ In 2022, it improved its oversight through more structured analysis of financial resilience. In 2025, the Home Office repeated this analysis to identify forces of financial concern and understand the causes of financial pressures, including collecting data on reserve levels and forces' borrowing to support capital spending. It intends to develop this analysis to provide a deeper understanding of the financial pressures facing forces and their use of funding.

1.18 The Home Office does not yet have all the information it needs on how forces spend the funding they receive. Gaps include:

- financial resilience of forces – more regularly monitoring the financial health of forces and deeper analysis to understand why some forces are facing greater financial pressure could help identify the root causes, such as variation in forces' financial management capability;
- police productivity and value for money in the use of funding – it is seeking to develop a more comprehensive view of police performance, including response times, crime outcomes and public perception. It also needs better data on police costs, the services they are providing (such as charge times) and their resource allocations to undertake deeper analysis of the link between resourcing and force performance; and
- operational decisions – developing metrics to better understand choices about operational priorities and local delivery of national agendas.

²⁰ Comptroller and Auditor General, *Financial sustainability of police forces in England and Wales 2018*, Session 2017-19, HC 1501, National Audit Office, September 2018, available at www.nao.org.uk/reports/financial-sustainability-of-police-forces-in-england-and-wales-2018/

Part Two

Improving the financial sustainability of policing

Previous attempts to improve financial sustainability

2.1 We have previously reported on police forces' need to make savings to remain within their budgets.²¹ In 2018, we reported that central government funding had fallen by 30% in real terms since 2010-11. The savings were removed from the annual police funding settlement and we highlighted that the financial pressures could result in forces being unable to deliver an adequate policing service.

2.2 The Home Office has previously committed to achieving savings within police spending, setting out its expectations in spending reviews.

- In 2015, it committed to saving £350 million from police procurement spending, in part through supporting the police-led Collaborative Law Enforcement Procurement programme which aimed to collaborate across policing, increase the standardisation of goods bought, aggregate purchasing and improve supplier and contract management. In 2018, the Home Office reported that this had saved £273 million.
- In 2020, it asked policing to find efficiency savings of £120 million by the end of 2020-21 by improving procurement practices, agile working and estate rationalisation. The Home Office was only able to provide evidence for £25 million of savings and could not demonstrate whether these were sustained. In 2021, it set a target of achieving a further £100 million in cashable savings by 2024-25. The Home Office reported this had been achieved.

The Home Office told us that the 2020 and 2021 targets were top-down efficiency assumptions built into police funding allocations, and it had expected forces to achieve savings as part of their annual budget management. It estimated that these savings equated to approximately 1% per annum of non-pay costs.

21 Comptroller and Auditor General, *Financial sustainability of police forces in England and Wales*, Session 2015-16, HC 78, National Audit Office, June 2015, available at www.nao.org.uk/reports/financial-sustainability-of-police-forces-in-england-and-wales/

2.3 As the previous government adopted a light-touch approach to police oversight, and data on benefits were limited, the Home Office was not fully aware of how savings were achieved. Other than a review of how some police forces have shared services, it had not undertaken any formal lessons-learned exercise of previous policing efficiency programmes, or the conditions needed for success. The Home Office drew on its past experiences to inform the design of the Police Efficiency and Collaboration Programme (PECP), including the need for a national programme. It told us that it also engaged with other parts of the public sector such as the National Health Service to learn about direct purchasing and logistics and drew on organisational experience from the prior Collaborative Law Enforcement Programme.

2.4 In 2020, the Home Office established BlueLight Commercial (BLC) to support police forces in achieving savings by improving procurement, commercial practices and capability, and cost recovery initiatives.²² The Home Office has provided annual funding of £5 million since 2020-21 and BLC has consistently met its targets for achieving efficiency savings since 2020-21. Between 2020-21 and 2024-25 BLC reported that it had achieved £112 million of direct benefits (cashable savings, cost avoidance, revenue and cost recovery) for policing in England and Wales. BLC manages approximately 300 contracts on behalf of policing and has achieved cashable savings by renegotiating contracts and commercial improvements. More widely, BLC has provided guidance and training to police forces to help them improve their commercial practices. However, BLC has not achieved all of the wider outcomes set out for it when it was created, such as creating a fundamental change in police procurement practices. Police forces are under no obligation to engage with BLC and it told us that it is seeking to understand reasons why forces do not use its services.

2.5 The Home Office has monitored BLC's performance through monthly, quarterly and annual reporting, setting objectives and KPIs to track performance each year. It is seeking to align BLC's role with the PECP and wider police reform, and has introduced new powers in the Crime and Policing Bill to support this. The Home Office is seeking to influence BLC's strategic direction and approach, and is revising its monitoring arrangements by bringing BLC and other organisations within new governance and assurance structures.

2.6 In 2023, HM Treasury published a framework to encourage greater consistency across departments in tracking and reporting efficiency savings, to be adopted from 2024-25. The Home Office is reporting quarterly to HM Treasury and, in doing so, will need to ensure police efficiencies meet key principles, including providing sufficient supporting evidence, assurance that savings have been realised within period and identifying any impacts on other areas of police operations.

²² BlueLight Commercial is a non-profit private company, limited by guarantee. It was introduced after the closure of the Collaborative Law Enforcement Procurement programme to carry on savings work and reform commercial practices.

Home Office plans to 2028-29

2.7 Following the July 2024 election, the Home Office worked with police stakeholders, including the National Police Chiefs' Council (NPCC), BLC and the Crown Commercial Service, to assess the potential savings from police forces' non-payroll spending. The Home Office identified the potential to achieve cashable efficiencies of up to £354 million between 2025-26 and 2028-29, including:

- using national procurement frameworks for police ICT, vehicles, energy and contract employees;
- developing standardised requirements for procuring common items and services to enable 'buying once' rather than forces buying individually;
- sharing common services and processes across police forces, particularly functions such as human resources, finance, commercial and procurement;
- using process automation and AI technology to free up police officers' time and enable their redeployment into priority areas, such as neighbourhood policing;
- maximising the recovery of costs for services; and
- creating a National Centre of Policing to take responsibility for specialist and support functions such as forensics, aviation and information technology.

2.8 The Home Office estimates that achieving £354 million of savings would represent 3.3% of non-pay and non-PCSO staff pay costs over the period to 2028-29, which is substantially higher than the savings achieved over 2021-2024. It is establishing the PECP to support police forces in achieving savings but, as at September 2025, had not yet decided how to meet this ambition. The Home Office faces considerable uncertainty in delivering planned savings and assessed 53% of potential savings as high or medium delivery risk, with some requiring structural changes, such as the establishment of the National Centre of Policing. There is also uncertainty over the funding needed to achieve savings and the Home Office had not established what funding was available. The Home Office also faces practical challenges:

- the scope to achieve savings across the 43 forces varies and is dependent upon a number of factors. The Home Office has begun to assess forces' capacity to make savings;
- there have been previous attempts to create a more coherent approach to police procurement. National procurement frameworks are already in place but forces are under no obligation to use these and there is considerable variation across forces; and
- some potential savings are based on increasing cost recovery and may require new legislation.

2.9 The Home Office has appointed a Senior Responsible Official and created a programme board to oversee the implementation of the programme. The programme team has also developed mitigations for delivery risks, including:

- engaging with commercial suppliers to inform them about the police market and barriers to entry;
- establishing greater control over delivery bodies by seeking new powers through the new Crime and Policing Bill; and
- identifying organisations that could host interim arrangements until the new policing body is established.

2.10 The Home Office has also made other changes to strengthen its oversight of policing and deliver planned reforms. It:

- more than doubled the number of permanent staff working on PECP between April 2024 and October 2025;
- created a Joint Police Reform Team, bringing together expertise from the Home Office, the Association of Police and Crime Commissioners and the NPCC to develop the approach to wider police reform; and
- established a new Police Standards and Performance Improvement Directorate to create a framework to measure police force performance across England and Wales.

2.11 Based on our previous work, we identified the factors that the Home Office still needed to consider as it implements its PECP.²³

- **Taking a long-term approach.** Departmental structures and processes for planning can lead to a short-term focus. In this context, the Home Office's focus on cashable efficiency savings may risk diverting focus and resources from achieving longer-term productivity gains within policing. The Home Office told us that its plans to develop the National Centre of Policing would help maintain a long-term view on improving police efficiency and productivity.
- **Having the right leadership, skills and capability.** Putting these enabling elements in place may require investment in staff training or technology. As at September 2025, the Home Office was still establishing the funding available to implement the PECP as part of its internal allocations process following the 2025 Spending Review.
- **Tracking progress.** An effective performance management system needs timely reporting against milestones. The PECP programme team is developing a benefits tracking and measurement framework, including benefit forecasts and delivery status. In September 2025, it was working to test the reliability of data and refine its approach to tracking progress.

²³ Comptroller and Auditor General, *Efficiency in government*, Session 2021-22, HC 303, National Audit Office, July 2021, available at www.nao.org.uk/insights/efficiency-in-government/

Previous attempts to improve police productivity

2.12 Between 2015-16 and 2019-20 the Home Office spent £373 million on the Police Transformation Programme, which aimed to transform how police use technology and deal with major threats. The programmes were expected to deliver cash savings as well as freeing up officers for frontline policing roles. It evaluated individual projects but did not draw these together to evaluate the extent of change. The Home Office reported that this programme had achieved benefits of £112 million by 2019-20 – against a target of £413 million – and does not know whether the anticipated £2.9 billion of benefits by 2027-28 will be realised.

2.13 In 2022, the former Home Secretary commissioned the NPCC to review the barriers to productivity and identify opportunities to improve police processes and harness technology.²⁴ The Policing Productivity Review was published in 2023 and identified many opportunities to improve productivity, with the potential to save 38 million hours of police time over five years. For example, it identified that 1.2 million hours could be saved by improving the response to missing persons and 1.1 million hours could be saved by improving custody processes. The Review team made 26 recommendations: mostly to be implemented by policing, including the College of Policing and NPCC, but with 10 aimed directly at the Home Office. A further 35 recommendations were made in follow-up reports. In April 2024, the then government set out how it would respond to the Review, focusing on investment in technology and establishing a Centre for Police Productivity, based in the College of Policing. The Home Office told us that this response reflected the views of the previous government, and it was pursuing other priorities. It has taken forward parts of the Review but has not tracked overall progress and the potential benefits have not yet been realised.

2.14 The Policing Productivity Review identified the potential to improve productivity by standardising police processes. The Review team worked with six forces to pilot a methodology and identified that standardised processes for dealing with antisocial behaviour and burglary dwelling could free up 500,000 hours. After identifying the limitations of this methodology, the College of Policing adapted it into a diagnostic and insight tool, and piloted this with six forces. This tool will enable forces to look at correlations between inputs, outputs and outcomes for burglary, robbery and shop lifting, helping them to benchmark, self-diagnose and identify opportunities to increase productivity. The College aims to launch the tool by December 2025. Forces told us that better streamlining of policing processes and managing demand offered the potential to make significant productivity improvements.

²⁴ The then Home Secretary commissioned the NPCC which in turn appointed Sir Stephen House to form and lead an independent review team to examine the barriers to productivity and identify opportunities to improve police processes and harness technology.

2.15 In 2024-25 the Home Office's National Police Capabilities Unit allocated £105 million to programmes aimed at improving police productivity, including facial recognition, forensics, knife detection and AI. This included £55.5 million of funding which was provided as part of a £234 million investment package announced by the previous government to improve police productivity and deliver the ambition of the Policing Productivity Review. Funding was to be provided over four years and was forecast to achieve benefits of £500 million over this period. HM Treasury withdrew the funding for 2025-26 onwards following the 2024 General Election and the Home Office allocated £50 million to fund these programmes in 2025-26, a reduction of 52% on the previous year.

Part Three

Improving police productivity

Understanding police productivity

3.1 We reported in 2015 and 2018 that the Home Office had limited data and analysis of police productivity. It does not yet have a shared definition of – or methodology for measuring – productivity, which makes it difficult to quantify productivity benefits and draw on this evidence to support investment decisions in new technologies or innovative practices. The Home Office has begun to address the inherent difficulties of measuring police productivity, including the lack of reliable data and trackable metrics and understanding the link between outputs and outcomes.

3.2 The Home Office is engaging with the Office for National Statistics (ONS) to establish a suitable definition and metric. The ONS has developed national measures of public services productivity but, due to difficulties measuring policing outputs and a lack of reliable data, has only published an aggregate measure for policing and immigration which considers expenditure and workforce data. It is working with the Home Office to review how a productivity measure could be developed, including defining the activities to be included and seeking reliable activity data. The ONS is seeking to separate policing from immigration, although this will still be an aggregate measure that does not provide force-level measures of productivity. The ONS has made greater progress in the health sector, improving the coverage of health services and weighting output measures.

3.3 The Home Office is developing a dashboard to monitor police performance and provide data on variations across forces. This alone will not enable the Home Office to understand the relative productivity of forces or assess drivers of improved productivity. It is establishing a database of force-level data to track the performance of forces and plans to develop the dashboard to measure productivity and organisational health. As part of this and its broader data reform agenda, it will seek to bring together data sets that are held by the following bodies.

- The Home Office publishes data on police funding, workforce, misconduct and recorded crimes. In 2023, it conducted a survey to collect data on how officers and staff spent their time (paragraph 1.10).
- The ONS publishes the Crime Survey for England and Wales.
- HM Inspectorate of Constabulary and Fire & Rescue Services (HMICFRS) collects detailed data on the performance of police forces as part of its efficiency, effectiveness and legitimacy inspections. These data are not shared for other purposes.
- The Chartered Institute of Public Finance and Accountancy collects spending and staffing data from forces. HMICFRS uses these data to publish value for money dashboards, providing comparative data on a range of policing activities and resilience.
- Police forces collect their own data. Police and criminal justice data are held in a variety of systems. Most forces use different systems and can have multiple systems to manage HR and finance. The degree to which these systems share information is limited which means inconsistencies in police data and reporting make cross-force comparison difficult.

3.4 The College of Policing is also working on a productivity methodology. It aims to improve police forces' understanding of how resource allocations affect productivity and support future investment decisions. The College is testing an index with police forces to measure productivity across crime prevention, crime response, and public safety and wellbeing. It aims to indicate how productivity has changed against a baseline year and therefore does not enable straightforward cross-force comparison. Further work is needed to ensure decisions around variables are evidence-based.

Tackling the barriers to improving police productivity

3.5 In consultation with the policing sector, the Home Office has assessed options to reform policing. The government plans to publish a white paper in 2025 to address the barriers that impede improvements to policing capabilities, achieve greater efficiency and improve public confidence. It will take the government time to implement the reforms, with any legislative changes not expected to take effect until the latter half of the current Parliament. We identified five barriers to improving police productivity, focussing on the steps that the Home Office can take and highlighting structural barriers that need to be addressed.

Insufficient understanding of what works

3.6 In 2024, the Home Office established the Centre for Police Productivity and commissioned the College of Policing to create a hub for innovation, support forces to use data and innovation, and help forces to evaluate and implement potential solutions.²⁵ The College has engaged widely with police forces to assess new initiatives but is dependent on forces choosing to share examples with it. Since May 2024, the College has identified 922 innovations, of which 80 were shortlisted and 22 recommended for sector-wide adoption. It also hosts a ‘practice bank’, providing details of 329 examples of innovative approaches, which is accessible to all forces. However, as of September 2025, 175 projects were classified as “untested” and 131 were flagged as “promising”. Nineteen were flagged as “smarter practice” where, although not formally evaluated, the practice should be considered by all forces. However, the police forces we spoke to told us that without prioritisation and a better understanding of potential benefits, they find it difficult to assess what might work for them. The Home Office has not yet evaluated the scope to improve the effectiveness of the College of Policing in this role or how it can better support the scaling of innovations with greatest potential. It has, though, set new indicators for 2025-26 to better assess the College’s performance.

3.7 Identifying ‘what works’ has been hampered by insufficient evaluation. In 2024, the College engaged with 20 forces and found that benefits management approaches were inconsistent and underdeveloped, with many forces lacking the systems to capture and evaluate the impact of new productivity measures. The Policing Productivity Review highlighted a lack of funding for evaluation, insufficient consideration of the need to measure benefits at the outset, and insufficient analytical skills. The Home Office has commissioned the College of Policing to develop a framework to encourage forces to adopt a standardised approach to benefits management, setting out a standard process for quantifying hours saved through productivity investments.

25 The College of Policing aims to support the professional development of police officers and staff, set standards and guidance and share knowledge and ‘what works’ across policing in England and Wales.

3.8 The Home Office also needs evaluation data to develop business cases to support investment in new approaches. There are examples where this has worked well (**Example 1**) and supported bids for funding but there is a risk that other potential productivity improvements are not being identified and exploited, due to a lack of understanding of potential benefits. Evaluations have not focused sufficiently on quantifying benefits, assessing outcomes and identifying the risks of implementing new working practices.

Example 1: Audio-Visual Multi Media (AVMM) redaction

The Policing Productivity Review estimated that approximately 532,000 officer hours were spent preparing files for cases that did not progress to a charge in 2022-23, including 210,000 hours on redaction of sensitive information. This includes redaction of material such as body-worn video, CCTV and audio recordings. AI-enabled tools are now available to automate the process of obscuring sensitive information from AVMM material. The Home Office estimates that, if adopted across England and Wales, this technology could save around 11,000 days per month nationally, equating to approximately £1.7 million per month. In 2025-26, the Home Office allocated £4.5 million to support forces to adopt effective technology and processes. As of September 2025, the Home Office expects that this will support up to 27 forces to improve their AVMM redaction capability.

Slow progress in adopting new technologies and working practices

3.9 There are many examples of new working practices and technologies at a local level, but the roll-out and adoption of new initiatives at a national level is fragmented and slow. For example, the trial and adoption of body-worn cameras by all police forces took 13 years to complete and enhanced video response is being used by only six forces despite trials showing benefits (**Example 2**). The lack of adoption of new practices has undermined forces' ability to make productivity gains.

Example 2: Enhanced Video Response (EVR)

EVR is used to respond to non-emergency calls via video. It was trialled by Dorset Police in 2023 and builds on a Rapid Video Response initiative used by Kent Police. Evaluation showed that EVR improved response time by 75 hours, increased investigation quality and improved victim satisfaction. The College of Policing led a replication and evaluation of EVR in Avon and Somerset, which was part funded by the Office of the Chief Scientific Advisor. The College of Policing intends to support national roll-out once this is complete. As of June 2025, another four forces had implemented EVR, and engagement has continued with other forces.

3.10 The College of Policing has used knowledge sharing events to promote new technologies and working practices. It also hosts regional innovation meetings where all forces are represented. However, the police forces we spoke to told us that there is no effective national mechanism for disseminating innovations, and that most sharing occurred locally between forces. In 2024, HMICFRS highlighted that forces should accelerate adoption of proven solutions. Our work identified:

- no clear framework for scaling innovations with the greatest potential. For example, the NPCC has functional leads – such as technology and AI – which could be exploited to a greater extent to support adoption across forces;
- short-term funding allocations restricting the pace and scale of roll-out. For example, the Home Office allocated 2025-26 funding for the AVMM redaction project in March 2025, limiting the time for forces to bid for funding and complete procurement processes within the financial year; and
- insufficient focus on the practicalities of embedding change across forces, e.g. by the development of ‘blueprints’ for new technologies to help forces understand the potential benefits and how to embed new techniques.

A lack of standardisation and no collective voice across policing

3.11 There is no obligation on police forces to adopt new practices and no central body empowered to mandate standardised systems or services, meaning there is no central decision-making on policy issues or specifications. As a result, it has been difficult to reach a consensus across 43 forces, which have operational autonomy, leading to variation in the adoption of new working practices and technologies or any standardisation of requirements. The Policing Productivity Review highlighted that ‘force exceptionalism’ (individual forces perceiving that they are unique) hindered the adoption of common practices, which restricted better police productivity and made efficiencies harder to achieve. The College of Policing sets standards for policing. While it has a shared power to mandate standardised procedures or practices, it has rarely used this, relying on issuing professional practice guidance.²⁶

3.12 The lack of effective central decision-making results in different approaches and duplication in similar functions, with forces maintaining their own teams for functions such as vetting, human resources and procurement. For example, the number of staff working in procurement has increased by 12% between 2014-15 and 2024-25, despite Home Office efforts to increase collaborative procurement. The Home Office has recognised that running parallel and duplicative capabilities wastes money. It has assessed that potential efficiency and productivity improvements could be achieved by creating national functions for services, such as vetting, that do not have geographical boundaries.

²⁶ The College of Policing has a power, which it shares with the Home Secretary, to regulate for the ‘procedures’ and ‘practices’ that must be followed in police forces – section 53A, Police Act 1996.

3.13 The lack of standardisation and common procurement practices means that forces do not benefit from economies of scale and are in a weaker commercial position with suppliers. As we have reported previously, the 43-force structure creates complexity in identifying and agreeing user requirements.²⁷ In 2011, the Home Office attempted to mandate police forces' procurement of ICT systems, but these were not adopted due to resistance from forces. Efforts to realise benefits from national procurement have not achieved the level of savings envisaged, in part due to forces not being compelled to sign-up. BlueLight Commercial (BLC) told us the development of national standards and their mandatory use in police procurement had the potential to realise greater efficiency savings than had been achieved so far.

Limited workforce flexibility

3.14 In 2022 we found that the government's focus on maintaining officer numbers meant police forces may have less flexibility in how they can use resources.²⁸ Since the completion of the Police Uplift Programme in March 2023 and the introduction of the Neighbourhood Policing Guarantee, ministers have directed that forces must maintain officer numbers and grow neighbourhood policing functions, with funding conditions linked to maintaining officer numbers. This means that police forces can only make savings from non-pay costs and police staff. In 2024, HMICFRS stated that the focus on officer numbers was "hindering efficiency and effectiveness, not helping it."²⁹ Police forces told us that greater flexibility would help to reduce costs (as police staff are less expensive than officers) and enable them to better develop the capabilities needed to support transformation programmes.

3.15 Police forces face difficulties recruiting and retaining specialist staff, which can restrict the integration of new technologies into working practices. Forces are often in competition with the private sector to recruit specialist digital skills, such as data analysts. On average, 5% of police staff are in ICT roles but this ranges from zero to 14% across forces. Despite this, the Home Office and policing have undertaken limited strategic workforce planning to identify skill shortages.

3.16 Workforce flexibility is also affected by police officers' terms of employment which are less flexible than those of civilian police staff. Police officers are officers under the Crown and therefore not legally employees of their police force. As a result, police officers cannot be made redundant, but they can resign, retire, or be dismissed on grounds of conduct or capability. Police forces can run voluntary exit schemes for police officers but, overall, voluntary resignation rates are low. The inability to make officers compulsorily redundant means that forces are more likely to make cuts to their civilian workforce to make savings.

27 Comptroller and Auditor General, *The National Law Enforcement Data Programme*, Session 2021-22, HC 663, National Audit Office, September 2021, available at www.nao.org.uk/reports/the-national-law-enforcement-data-programme/

28 Comptroller and Auditor General, *The Police Uplift Programme*, Session 2021-22, HC 1147, National Audit Office, March 2022, available at www.nao.org.uk/reports/the-police-uplift-programme/

29 HM Inspectorate of Constabulary and Fire & Rescue Services, *State of Policing: The Annual Assessment of Policing in England and Wales 2023*, July 2024, available at <https://hmicfrs.justiceinspectorates.gov.uk/publications/state-of-policing-the-annual-assessment-of-policing-in-england-and-wales-2023/>

The need to exploit digital technology and AI

3.17 The transformation of police technology, and adoption of new digital technologies, is critical to driving productivity across policing. The development of live facial recognition technology illustrates both the potential and challenges of using new technologies (**Example 3**).

Example 3: Live Facial Recognition (LFR)

LFR is technology that allows the police to locate individuals on a watchlist in public spaces, by using live video feeds to scan faces in real-time. It was initially trialled by the Metropolitan Police and South Wales Police between 2016 and 2018 where it successfully aided the arrest of suspects. The Home Office allocated LFR £3.35 million in 2024-25, but provided no funding for further capability in 2025-26. In August 2025, the Home Office announced the roll out of 10 new vans with LFR technology to seven forces. The Home Office and police forces face the risk of legal challenges from individuals and organisations who oppose the use of the technology, and the Equality and Human Rights Commission has raised concerns on the threat to human rights. The Home Office is undertaking work to establish a new legal framework for facial recognition.

3.18 Responsibility for testing and rolling out new technologies is spread across:

- the Home Office, which has provided funding for testing and rollout;
- the College of Policing, which assesses potential new technologies through its innovation pipeline;
- the Police Digital Service, which supports policing by running and developing digital services. It has worked with the NPCC to help produce the National Policing Cyber Security Strategy and deliver the National Policing Digital Strategy;
- BlueLight Commercial, which is responsible for the procurement of some national policing ICT systems, including the National Data Quality Improvement Service;
- the Police Chief Scientific Adviser, who seeks to ensure that science, analysis, research and technology are utilised effectively in policing;
- the NPCC, which has established a Science and Innovation Committee; and
- individual police forces, who lead on the adoption of specific technologies.

3.19 Our previous work has identified the barriers to successful digital transformation across government, including the funding models used; under-estimating the scope of early work; and a lack of skills or leadership.³⁰ The NPCC identified that the absence of a single policing ‘voice’ leads to a lack of clarity in decision-making and insufficient prioritisation of science and technology across policing. It also highlighted challenges for policing in recruiting and retaining a skilled digital workforce, the need to maintain legacy systems restricting the ability to invest in new technology, financial constraints leading to inconsistent digital transformation, poor data quality and insufficient support for change management. The Home Office has also recognised that multiple funding streams make it more difficult to prioritise investment decisions in new technology, limiting longer-term planning and rollout.

3.20 Police forces spend around £2 billion annually on technology, with 97% spent on maintaining legacy systems. In 2024-25, HM Treasury provided £234 million over four years to help fund investments in police technology, including £55.5 million in 2024-25. The Home Office used this to help support the roll-out of technologies, including live facial recognition, the use of drones, automating public contact and AI. HM Treasury withdrew this funding from 2025-26, and the Home Office has not allocated funding for some projects, such as live facial recognition, and reduced funding for other projects, including knife detection technology.³¹

3.21 Policing has identified opportunities to exploit AI in preventing, detecting and investigating crime, improving public engagement and increasing police productivity. The NPCC has highlighted the need for engagement with the private sector and academia to harness innovation alongside encouraging force-level innovation, clear communication of the use of AI in policing to articulate how improvements will be delivered in communities, a framework for forces to ensure consistent delivery of responsible AI and clarity on key stakeholders’ responsibilities. The development of AI requires policing to balance innovation with responsible implementation. The College of Policing has published guidance on how to select, test and embed AI, and the NPCC has set out principles for using AI and guidance to encourage police forces and policing and criminal justice agencies to work together on AI.

30 Comptroller and Auditor General, *Digital transformation in government: a guide for senior leaders and audit and risk committees*, National Audit Office, February 2024, available at www.nao.org.uk/insights/digital-transformation-in-government-a-guide-for-senior-leaders-and-audit-and-risk-committees/

31 In 2025-26, the Home Office told us it provided funding for wider facial recognition projects – including £3.9 million for a strategic facial matching service – and to evaluate the benefits and use of facial recognition. Some police forces provided additional funding for facial recognition technology.

Home Office plans for police reform

3.22 The Home Office plans to establish a new body – the National Centre of Policing – as part of its reform of the policing system. It has recognised that there are missed opportunities for economies of scale and tackling waste, a lack of visibility of performance and monitoring of investments, no impetus or co-ordination of support for improvement and challenges with collective decision-making at the national level. The new body will focus initially on services such as forensics and information technology, aiming to provide police forces with better and more efficient support. The Home Office has indicated that once the new body is established, it will explore options to expand its remit to other areas, including the coordination of operational activity. Decisions about the scope and remit of the new body will dictate how much it will cost to establish and operate, and whether new legislation will be required.

3.23 There are examples of police structural reforms in other jurisdictions such as the Netherlands and Scotland. In 2013, Police Scotland was created from the merger of Scottish territorial police forces. The Scottish Police Authority reported that policing in Scotland saved £200 million a year and 2.5 million hours of police officer time through increased operational and technological efficiencies. Police Scotland has seen improved crime resolution rates and a reduction in recorded crime. However, these reforms also encountered challenges, including maintaining service level standards while undergoing structural reorganisation and tensions between the priorities of local communities and the national policing framework.

Wider systems thinking

3.24 Decisions made in the wider criminal justice system have the potential to affect police productivity and efficiency. The Ministry of Justice is implementing sentencing reforms to reduce pressure on prison system capacity, which will see some offenders released after serving a third of their sentence. The 2025 Independent Sentencing Review acknowledged the potential impact on police services, noting that everyone released or diverted from custody places extra burdens on stretched forces. While the government's collective decision-making process means that policy decisions are considered, the Ministry of Justice's impact assessment did not quantify the impact on demand for police services or any associated financial implications. The lack of capacity in the Probation Service to supervise an increased number of offenders in the community may also increase the demand on policing. Our October 2025 report set out that HM Prison and Probation Service is exploring changes to the scope of what probation services deliver – and how it is delivered – to free up staff capacity. It highlighted that some of these changes could carry risks to government objectives such as the 'Safer Streets' mission, if not actively managed.³²

³² Comptroller and Auditor General, *Building an effective and resilient Probation Service*, Session 2024-26, HC 1354, National Audit Office, October 2025, available at www.nao.org.uk/reports/building-an-effective-and-resilient-probation-service/

3.25 In our report on the Police Uplift Programme, we noted that the Home Office did not fully understand the programme's downstream impacts on the wider criminal justice system, and recommended that it work with partners to develop this. The Home Office has assessed the potential impact of the Neighbourhood Policing Guarantee. It concluded that it expects the additional personnel to deter crime and that there would not be a significant impact on the number of criminal charges brought or demand for prison places. However, this assessment was based on initial assumptions about how the Guarantee was to be implemented and is subject to change following agreement with ministers. The Home Office recognises that more work is needed to assess the systemic effects of changes to how police forces operate. Increased police productivity is also likely to have an impact on the wider criminal justice system.

Appendix One

Our audit approach

Our scope

1 This report examines how the Home Office is supporting police forces to improve their productivity and long-term financial sustainability. It covers:

- the financial pressures facing policing;
- the Home Office's approach to monitoring and improving the financial sustainability of policing; and
- what is needed to achieve lasting improvements in police productivity.

2 We last examined police financial sustainability in 2018. The new government is implementing its 'Safer Streets' mission in a context of high levels of demand on policing, constrained public funding and police forces facing increasing pressures. This report aims to provide a health-check of the financial state of policing and examines the extent to which the Home Office is supporting improvements in productivity. It makes recommendations to reduce the barriers to change which will be important for the Home Office to consider as it introduces its planned reforms in the coming white paper.

3 Our report focuses on the role of the Home Office, as the responsible department, but we also consider the work of stakeholders such as the College of Policing and HM Inspectorate of Constabulary and Fire & Rescue Services (HMICFRS). Responsibility for policing is devolved to the governments of Northern Ireland and Scotland. This report covers England and Wales.

Our evidence base

4 Our independent conclusions on how the Home Office is supporting police forces to improve their productivity and long-term financial sustainability were reached following our analysis of evidence between April and September 2025.

5 To understand police forces' financial resilience, including the financial pressures policing face, changing demands and how forces are managing their budgets, and the Home Office's oversight of these issues (Part 1), we:

- carried out quantitative analysis of publicly available data on police funding, levels of reserves, police recorded crime and police workforce;
- carried out qualitative and quantitative analysis of the pressures facing policing and how these are changing;
- carried out qualitative analysis of the Home Office's assessments of new demands on policing – such as the Police (Vetting) Regulations 2025 and the amendment to the Road Traffic Act 1988 (Police Driving: Prescribed Training) Regulations 2025;
- interviewed relevant teams at the Home Office, including the funding team, police reform team, police workforce and professionalism unit and the neighbourhood policing team;
- engaged with police forces (Bedfordshire Police, Norfolk Constabulary, Essex Police and West Yorkshire Police) to gain an understanding of the pressures they are facing and their responses to managing these pressures;
- interviewed the National Police Chiefs' Council (NPCC) to understand its oversight of the financial pressures facing policing and how police forces are responding to manage their budgets. We also reviewed the NPCC's data from its survey of police force finances; and
- reviewed the Home Office's systems for gathering and analysing information about forces' financial resilience, including its assessment of financial risks.

6 To explore how the Home Office plans to improve the financial sustainability of policing and deliver a new programme of efficiency savings (Part 2), we:

- reviewed documentary evidence on the Home Office's approach to establishing its Police Efficiency and Collaboration Programme;
- reviewed the Home Office's previous saving initiatives, focusing on its evaluation of the 2015 and 2020-21 spending reviews, and the level of assurance it could provide over reported savings;
- analysed the Home Office's assessment of efficiency savings over the period to 2028-29;
- interviewed the HM Treasury team responsible for developing the Government Efficiency Framework;
- reviewed documentation on the performance of, and Home Office oversight of, BlueLight Commercial (BLC);
- engaged with BLC to understand its role in improving police efficiency, and the challenges it faces;
- engaged with the team that worked on the Policing Productivity Review; and
- interviewed relevant teams at the Home Office.

7 To understand the Home Office's approach to measuring productivity, the barriers to improving productivity and the Home Office's approach to tackling these (Part 3), we:

- reviewed documents related to the Policing Productivity Review, including the Home Office's approach to implementing the recommendations;
- reviewed how the Home Office was working with stakeholders to develop its understanding of police productivity measurements, including work from the Office for National Statistics and the National Statistician's Independent Review of the Measurement of Public Services Productivity;
- engaged with the Analysis Hub to understand wider government approaches to measuring innovation and the potential application of these techniques to the policing sector;
- engaged with the College of Policing to understand its role in improving police productivity and encouraging adoption of innovation, and the challenges it faces. This included qualitative analysis of documents and interviews with key personnel;
- interviewed teams at the Home Office including Home Office Analysis and Insights, the police performance and standards unit; the police reform team; and teams involved in technology and innovation;

- conducted an extensive literature review of the barriers to police productivity, including the Policing Productivity Review, police stakeholders and the Home Office's own analysis. Drawing on our previous reports on police financial sustainability, we sought to identify the main barriers to improving police productivity. We then identified what action the Home Office was taking to improve productivity and the roll-out of innovative new practices, and the longer-term structural barriers that needed to be addressed;
- interviewed representatives from the NPCC to understand their view on the barriers to improving police productivity;
- analysed documentation from Home Office in relation to the rollout of technology initiatives, including the funding available to support implementation.
- engaged with HMICFRS to understand its data and methodology used for its Value-for-Money dashboards and its police efficiency, effectiveness and legitimacy assessments;
- engaged with police forces (Bedfordshire Police, Norfolk Constabulary, Essex Police and West Yorkshire Police) to understand their approach to adopting innovative new approaches and the conditions needed for success; and
- reviewed literature around the merger of police forces in Scotland and spoke with Audit Scotland about its audit report.

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