

BRITISH BROADCASTING CORPORATION

RADIO 4

TRANSCRIPT OF "FILE ON 4" – "POLICE FUNDING CRISIS"

CURRENT AFFAIRS GROUP

TRANSMISSION: Tuesday 10th November 2009 2000 - 2040

REPEAT: Sunday 15th November 2009 1700 - 1740

REPORTER: Allan Urry

PRODUCER: Ian Muir-Cochrane

EDITOR: David Ross

PROGRAMME NUMBER: 09VQ4561LH0

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“FILE ON 4”

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ACTUALITY OF SIRENS

URRY: There are record numbers of police officers on our streets, record reductions in crime and more money spent on the service than at any time in its history. Crime fighting has never had it so good - or has it? Beyond the headlines, there's dissatisfaction on both side of the blue line. People in crisis are not getting help.

OVEREND: They said, you know, that I needed to calm down, that they were trying as hard as they can, but they were having a very high volume of calls, and I questioned them saying, does a first degree emergency mean that I have to be raped or murdered before you actually come out and see if we're ok?

URRY: Chief Constables complain of postcode policing, saying some forces are being treated unfairly by a Home Office funding system which creates winners and losers.

SPENCE: We're just asking for a fair share of the budget. But I think everybody, wherever you are in the country, there is an expectation that there should be a similar level of policing. It should not be a postcode lottery.

URRY: Tonight, File on 4 investigates three force areas battling to maintain service because they say they haven't got enough money to go round. How could this have happened in a system which is supposed to be adjusted to meet the needs of every police force? Why hasn't the Home Office sorted it out at a time when police argue they're being asked to do more than ever before?

SIGNATURE TUNE

ACTUALITY OF WHEELCHAIR

CHICK: When we had police officers in attendance, we had two riot vans, two police cars and they basically surrounded the area. I have got severe cerebral palsy and I am not going to be able to stop someone if they come at me with knives. I can state for you today, if I didn't have these officers I would not be here.

URRY: Damian Chick believes he owes his life to police based at the local station not far from the street in Cardiff where he used to live. Because of his cerebral palsy, Damian is confined to a wheelchair. He lived on the ground floor of a little terraced house in the Cathays district of the city with others in his family, but his mother's former partner suffered serious mental illness which made him very violent.

CHICK: All the windows you can see on the ground floor, including the door and everything, were all smashed.

URRY: He was trying to break in?

CHICK: Yeah, he basically tried to climb through the window. If the police officer from the local police station did not leg it round here with about four cars, he would have been in the house.

URRY: Was he armed when he did this?

CHICK: They found a knife on him and he also used a piece of concrete which he got out of a local skip.

URRY: You must have been very scared?

CHICK: Yes.

URRY: And your mum.

CHICK: Yes, and my brother.

URRY: How long did this actually go on for?

CHICK: This went on for near enough, near enough a year. One evening out of many, it took twelve police officers to restrain him in the middle of the street.

URRY: The proximity of police station was important for you?

CHICK: Yeah, if it wasn't for the local officers, I wouldn't be here.

URRY: You really he think he would have killed you?

CHICK: Yes, I know he would have.

URRY: Cathays is one of four police stations in the city scheduled for closure, yet the district is said to have the highest policing need of any area in Wales. The local MP, Liberal Democrat Jenny Willott, showed File on 4 around the terraced streets.

WILLOTT: It's got incredibly high levels of violence. There were some new figures released this week that showed that's a real problem in this particular area. It's also got very high levels of burglary and robbery.

URRY: And how does having a local police station right here in the area help that situation?

WILLOTT: It acts as a deterrent. People can see the police station, there are people going in and out of it all the time. I think also in terms of rapid response when there's a problem means that the police are nearby and they are able to respond quickly.

URRY: You're worried then about crime increasing in this area presumably?

WILLOTT: I am concerned that it's going to have an impact on how safe people feel and possibly an effect on crime rates, but if it's going to take longer for the police to respond to incidents, then I think that's going to have a knock-on impact on everyone that's living in the area.

URRY: What have constituents been telling you?

WILLOTT: People feel very strongly about it. I think they're very concerned that yet again resources are being brought away from local areas and are being centralised in a way that's going to focus on the city centre and take away from the residential areas.

URRY: It's not unusual for stations to be shut when they don't get used much, but in South Wales, Chief Constable Barbara Wilding says she's been forced to close four of hers because of a multi million pound budget deficit.

WILDING: What we are doing is finding alternatives in certain areas, and we have done this successfully before, say moving into a community centre to have surgeries and to have a presence, so we'd never abandon an area without an alternative. Now the public may not like the alternative, because they want to see the police station open with the front door open 24/7.

URRY: Well, fair enough really, isn't it?

WILDING: No, it isn't, because what they also want is me to put more officers out on the street.

URRY: But that's where they come from, isn't it? They want their local area policed by local police officers?

WILDING: Exactly, they want their local area policed but they also want the station open, I can't do both. I wish I could.

URRY: I mean, ideally would you if you had the money?

WILDING: Yes.

URRY: This is a busy force, policing half the population of Wales, who live in areas which are said to be among the most deprived in Europe. The majority of the nations' public order offences happen in Cardiff and Swansea, and then there's the costs of ensuring public safety at the Millennium Stadium, for royal visits and other major events in the capital. Yet, according to the Chief Constable, they have only got two more police officers than they did in 1979. So, when funding is squeezed, something has to give. While they are trying to make alternatives to police stations work, they're in retreat on the major road which keeps the area moving.

ACTUALITY IN CAR

BAKER: This is the longest single stretch of motorway, 108 miles altogether of motorway carriageway, thousands and thousands of vehicles using the road on a daily basis, huge dangers involved.

URRY: Wayne Baker is a former traffic cop, and still a serving officer. We're on the M4 in an unmarked car during a heavy downpour. Since May, the force has withdrawn routine patrols by traffic officers to save money.

BAKER: Because the enforcement doesn't exist, the fear of enforcement doesn't exist, and having worked on the motorway for eight years I've dealt with enough serious and fatal collisions on this road, and we really do need to have a dedicated unit patrolling this road to ensure that people's driving standards do not fall any further. What you tend to find, particularly in the weather we have at the moment, is it's

BAKER cont: very inclement, and as you can see that four wheel drive up ahead driving too close to the vehicle in front.

URRY: He's far too close.

BAKER: And had to veer because he came up behind that vehicle. There's nobody here to put a check on that. I think the risk of serious injury or fatalities increases exponentially with that increase in speed.

URRY: Instead, civilian highway staff are to be used to clear debris and keep traffic moving - people who don't have law enforcement powers. South Wales Police say they will respond to emergencies and that they have officers in unmarked vehicles on the motorway, but that withdrawing routine patrols by traffic officers and their specially equipped cars will save about £2 million a year. Wayne Baker, who speaks for the local police federation, sympathises but he's worried about leaving the road open for criminals.

BAKER: It's the only public area I can think of in England and Wales where the Chief Constable says we will not routinely patrol. You're inviting certain elements to use that area - criminal elements - because you're giving them confidence that they aren't going to be caught. If I was dealing in drugs, that's probably the area that I would aim for.

URRY: It will be routinely patrolled, won't it, but not by police officers?

BAKER: It'll be routinely patrolled for the collection of debris off the carriageway. There will be no enforcement, there will be no high visibility deterrent for people misusing the roads, there will be no intelligence gathering in relation to the criminal use of the roads, so in that sense the road will not be routinely patrolled. And I'm not denying that there will be police officers using that road, because inevitably people will be travelling from A to B along the motorway. Whether they will be in a position to actually stop vehicles, that's another thing altogether.

URRY: But Chief Constable Barbara Wilding argues she's got no choice if she's to find the savings she needs.

WILDING: We have cut, cut, cut and cut and I'm afraid 'salami slicing', as we call it, is no longer an opportunity now. Now we are absolutely into looking at what do we stop doing.

URRY: How much savings do you have to make this year then?

WILDING: £6.8 million.

URRY: And the measures that you've taken so far? Is that getting you close to that figure?

WILDING: Oh, we're in a bit of jeopardy, to be frank. We're confident around the greater proportion, but we're probably not so confident about £2 million at the moment. Next year's under-funding is in the region of £14 million.

URRY: Some people have implied, in the measures that you've already taken, that you're being irresponsible in doing this. Are you?

WILDING: No I don't think I've ever been irresponsible in the whole of my police service. I do everything that's evidence-led and I can produce all the work that we've done to look to see, you know, that these are the areas where we can save money by doing it differently, and other areas where it's not our job.

URRY: But underneath these cuts, I sense you want to make a point about this, don't you?

WILDING: Well I, I, we were backed into a corner in so much as where else are we going to find the money from?

WILKINSON: Total spending on police services at a local level is up towards £12 billion a year now, probably around 75% to 80% of that comes from Government grants and the balance of about 25% across the country as a whole comes from council tax. In an ideal world, what would happen would be that everybody across the country would get the same level of service and they'd pay the same level of council tax. But obviously the needs of different areas will vary from one part of the country to another, according to the social characteristics, the economy and that sort of thing, and also you have affluent areas and less affluent areas so that resources are lower in some parts of the country than others. And what the formula does is, through a complex arrangement, it tries to balance those two aims.

URRY: This has proved so tricky that it's actually created winners and losers. According to some, the formula has failed to keep pace with demographic changes in places like Cambridgeshire, where the Chief Constable is Julie Spence.

SPENCE: We are the fastest growing county. We have a very complex environment within which we have to police, which is not always recognised by Government, perhaps the public in general, because they see Cambridgeshire as a very leafy area – Cambridge University, the Backs, Ely Cathedral – as a very nice, wealthy, middle class area. Well, we are not. We are a county of two halves. We do have the vibrant economies around the university and within the county, but we also have probably one of the biggest gaps between affluence and deprivation of probably anywhere, and in fact part of our county has the equivalent deprivation levels to Hackney in London. So we have a really complex environment we have to police, and that puts stresses and strains on normal policing delivery.

URRY: No-one's more aware of that than those who need police in an emergency.

OVEREND: I rang 999, saying we had four guys who were obviously under the influence of alcohol and drugs, threatening us with violence and rape. They were still on the premises and could someone come out straight away.

URRY: In August, student nurse Amy Overend made emergency calls to police when a gang of men entered the seven-storey accommodation block she shared with other nurses and medics in Peterborough. The area's not well lit and quite isolated. No one knows how the men got in to what is supposed to be a secure building, but Amy, who was only 19, told us what happened when they did.

ACTUALITY IN BUILDING

OVEREND: These are the corridors. These came through these double doors, knocked on this door first. They kept asking, 'Is there a party? Where's the party, we've brought all this alcohol, all this weed and stuff.'

URRY: Drugs?

OVEREND: Yes. So we were very much like, 'Well, there's no party here.' They kept getting more aggressive, saying, 'Well, you know, let us in,' that kind of thing. We were like, 'No, we really think you should leave.' We were backing them down the corridor, which is when they turned round and said, 'We'll remember your faces and next time you leave the house we're going to rape you.'

URRY: So far so bad. The nurses called 999 and were told police would send someone. For a while the men had gone downstairs, climbed onto a flat roof and began throwing bottles and other missiles, as well as hurling threats and abuse. What was scaring Amy and her friend was that they appeared to be able to get in and out of the building at will. So when no one came to rescue, the girls again called 999.

OVEREND: I think we left it for about an another hour until we made another one, asking is anyone actually coming, and by this point I wasn't very happy, you know. I questioned them, saying does a first degree emergency mean that I have to be raped or murdered before you actually come out and see if we're okay?

URRY: What was the response to that?

OVEREND: They weren't very happy about it, I don't think. They said, you know, that I needed to calm down, that the call was being recorded and that, you know, they were trying as hard as they can but they were having a very high volume of calls, and I was just saying, you know, it's very unacceptable the way that we were being treated.

URRY: By this time Amy's father had joined the list of callers to Cambridgeshire's emergency control room. He lived too far away to come to help her, but he was insisting on the need for a fast response. But that didn't happen. It took four hours for police to arrive.
And what did they tell you about the delay when they did turn up?

OVEREND: They said that there was another emergency in town and there were very few police officers on that night. They had a really high number of calls.

URRY: Was anybody ever caught?

OVEREND: No. The investigation is still going on now, but ...

URRY: But these men were here for a good couple of hours.

OVEREND: Yes.

URRY: A chance missed really to arrest them.

OVEREND: Yes, definitely.

URRY: Amy says she and her friend were terrified to go out for weeks afterwards. And that doesn't surprise county councillor Geoffrey Heathcock, a former magistrate. He's listened to the police control room tape recordings of the nurses' desperate pleas for help, which has troubled him.

HEATHCOCK: To actually have a situation where these young ladies are having to repeatedly use the 999 system and still not get a response for over four hours is just absolutely unacceptable in this day and age. Whether or not the police, as they often will say is, oh well, we had other priorities at that time. Well, a response should have been made and made much more quickly.

URRY: Those emergency calls were taped, weren't they, and you've heard the tape, so were you in any doubt about the seriousness of the situation, listening to those tapes?

HEATHCOCK: None whatsoever. From all that we have seen, all that we have heard, that situation was potentially life threatening, an A grade call should have been responded to in minutes, not in hours.

URRY: The Chief Constable made a personal apology to the nurses and held an inquiry. It found control room staff made mistakes by downgrading the seriousness of the problem, and that was compounded by a high number of calls on a busy night with few resources on the ground. And that resonates with concerns residents have been raising with Councillor Heathcock.

HEATHCOCK: To Joe Public, who is wanting a good service and is paying, reasonably they want a good quality service coming out the other end and they want a good response when they need that response.

URRY: Are they not getting that response then, is that what people are telling you?

HEATHCOCK: Well, I think it's patchy. I think this is the problem, it is very very patchy. I get feedback from my own residents, basically with the all too common theme – where are the police? There ain't enough of them, and those that we have got often as not are extracted for long periods of the year to cover gaps within the police doing other things in the county.

URRY: So what do you think is going on?

HEATHCOCK: I think there's a number of problems going on here. There is the overall workload, which undoubtedly is increasing, but the establishment figures have not reflected that, so they haven't been adjusted to a proper and sensible level, nor has the actual amount of cash coming from central Government actually kept up with the demand for service and the workload here in Cambridgeshire.

URRY: Cambridgeshire Chief Constable Julie Spence goes further. She says because the Home Office hasn't taken account of the demographic changes in her county, the area's being treated unfairly.

SPENCE: We have always been the one of the lowest funded forces in the country and also we are one of the fastest growing counties, and we know that if we'd had the funding formula applied fairly over the last five years we'd have had year on year at least £2 million more which, now you are facing what look like – with the public sector finances as they are – cuts, quite a considerable impact this will actually have on our front line service delivery. So we reckon probably over the last five years, something in the region of £10 to £15 million we have not been able to invest in the constabulary and the policing services because of the way the funding formula works.

URRY: But doesn't the Home Office take account of all that? They must know that, mustn't they?

SPENCE: They know, but I mean, a lot of this has changed in the last four to five years, and it's been a rapid change, particularly through migration, and that has not been properly, I don't think, at this moment in time reflected in the funding formula. So there is a real need for somebody to grip it and look at it and try to come up with a solution that is equitable and fair. And if I give you an example, the Inspectorate of Constabulary have just done some value for money studies and they are looking at the forces against each other, and if you look at that from a Cambridgeshire perspective it shows us that against the national average we are 407 fewer staff than the national average, and against our most similar group of forces, forces that look like us, have a similar make-up, we are about 185 fewer.

URRY: You're saying that's unfair, are you, it's being applied unfairly?

SPENCE: Yes. In essence the funding formula was brought in to identify a fair distribution of grant, but it's never been properly applied. All I am asking for is an equitable share, because I believe it is not right for the people of Cambridgeshire that they should be getting a lesser service than those people we are being compared with. I think everybody, wherever you are in the country, there is an expectation that there should be a similar level of policing. It should not be a postcode lottery.

URRY: But it seems that's the way it's going to stay. Policing Minister David Hanson has told File on 4 that, as far as he's concerned, the service overall has been well supported financially, and for now he's not about to change the way funding is shared out.

HANSON: As I know – and I'm honest enough, I hope, to admit this – that the formula has had its critics, we've agreed to review it in the next cycle, starting in 2011. That will be undertaken, over the next twelve months, people will have an opportunity to make their comments on it, and we've committed for funding now at record levels right through to 2011.

URRY: I'm sure the review will be welcome but it's a bit late now, isn't it, for all those forces that are complaining that their problems with this thing goes back some years now. They've been chronically under-funded for a while.

HANSON: Well, I don't accept that they've been chronically under-funded. This year we've got £3.7 billion increase between 1997 and 2010/11 over what it was, which is a 60% increase in police funding, 20% in real terms. There are record numbers of police officers on the street and there is a record reduction in crime of around 36-37%, so I think the funding is always going to be an issue, but no one can say that this Labour Government hasn't put resources into policing.

URRY: I don't think anybody is saying that, they're just saying the way it's divided up is unfair. Why has South Wales Police lost out then?

HANSON: Well, South Wales Police have made a case to me around a range of issues, we've looked at that and I believe they've got sufficient funding to meet their particular needs. They

URRY: They don't seem to think that. They're having to cut service now.

HANSON: They will raise issues around big strategic things, which are valid points which we need to look at in relation to the future funding formula, but I don't believe that they're under-funded now and I don't believe that in relation to other forces that they have that level of concern.

URRY: You're being accused effectively of unfairness here, aren't you? The Chief Constable of Cambridgeshire, for example, says that the formula has been improperly applied.

HANSON: Well I know Julie Spence has some concerns around the formula taking into account potentially some of the factors to do with the immigrant population and crime associated with that. You know, those are real issues, they are issues that I am willing to look at as part of our review of the formula. But I have to say to all Chief Constables, this is the deal, I'm happy to review it and we are doing, but at the moment it's in a positive frame for me in terms of where we are.

URRY: But our investigation suggests that the deal has created postcode policing. The Association of Chief Police Officers told this programme it had identified sixteen forces suffering from the iniquities of the funding formula. And, even when the formula gets it right, some forces say they still don't get what it says they're entitled to.

ACTUALITY IN CAR

URRY: I'm driving around Derby, where there's been an emerging problem more usually associated with big inner city areas. Two men are awaiting sentence for the murder of a 15 year old from a rival gang. It's this city's first fatal gang-related shooting, and police are trying to ensure it's the last. But it's meant responding to an extra demand. Police have got to try to keep the more serious organised crime groups from outside the area from muscling in, as well as dealing with the volatile behaviour of their two main rival groups locally, who call themselves BCT and A1.

INSLEY: Turn right, which'll take us into the Browning Circle area, which is predominantly where the gang called the BCT are based. The area we've just been through is Allenton, which is where the A1 crew come from. They're literally border to border.

URRY: Derbyshire Police put a squad of twelve officers together called Operation Redshank, tasked with tackling the problem. The gangs and the guns which have come with them are funded by drug dealing, so that's got to be attacked as well. How do you do that in a force which doesn't get the funding it says it's entitled to? By robbing Peter to pay Paul. Detective Constable Phil Insley is one of the Redshank squad. He knows they've got to react fast to intelligence, because gang members are typically young and volatile. But when File on 4 visited, he and his colleagues were spending most of their time on a murder enquiry elsewhere in the county, unrelated to the gang problem.

INSLEY: It times it leaves us very stretched, especially when there is quite a major incident – ie, a shooting or a murder – because most of the office gets taken on to the murder to investigate that, leaving no staff to cope with what is generally the day to day intelligence gathering, dealing with the people who've been arrested. There's nobody left in the office to do that.

URRY: So what's the consequence of that when you do finally go off a major incident then? What happens?

INSLEY: The main problem, we've got sometimes up to three or four months intelligence backlog and it's like playing catch-up all the time.

URRY: You need that consistency of approach really, on something like this?

INSLEY: Yes, it wouldn't take a lot for the whole situation to get out of control again. All of the gangs are quite aware of the unit now and you quite often get asked, you know, is Operation Redshank still in existence by some of the gang members, and it's like they're just looking for the opportunity for someone to say, 'No, it's gone now.'

URRY: The difficulty of not acting on intelligence means criminals are going unchallenged.

INSLEY: This pub here to the right, that at the moment, intelligence suggests, there's quite a lot dealing out of the back car park. See, that was in the process of being developed, the intelligence there, but that's now all been kind of put on hold because of the murder inquiry we've all been taken on to. They could have moved on from there by the time we're all back off the murder inquiry, which then means that you've got to try and get the intelligence to suggest where they've moved on to in order to be able to start targeting them again.

URRY: While officers in Operation Redshank can't tackle all the drug dealing which funds the gangs, their divisional commander has put together a local drugs squad, to help take up the slack, but again it's had to be supplemented by officers who would usually be on other duties, such as neighbourhood policing. And for Chief Superintendent Andy Hough, that creates a further problem. It costs more to do more, and that includes repairing damage to property during raids.

HOUGH: I have a budget to manage, and because we've been so active with drugs raids, I know that by the end of this financial year, with boarding up, with removal and storage of exhibits, my budget is going to be £50,000 overspent. And it gets to the stage where you have to start saying to yourself, unless we can reduce those costs through process, we might have to think twice around which warrants we do and which ones we don't.

URRY: So you're seriously considering whether you actually physically kick down doors or not, because you can't afford the cost of repair?

HOUGH: I've got to find a way somehow of funding it and I can't keep going over budget, so I've got to try and find another way of doing it or we're going to have to try and time how we do these warrants, and we're going to have to look how we deal with the exhibits. And I suppose one balance may be you've got a cannabis grower, and we know that virtually every warrant we do around the cannabis grower we have a result. Now we could spend some time with surveillance, see who is actually

HOUGH cont: managing the crop and look at taking the offender, or I actually say, 'Let's not bother with that, let's just hit the warrant, crash and burn, destroy all the exhibits.' Okay, I don't bring an offender to justice, but I get rid of that particular problem and I don't have to pay for storage, because I just dispose and burn all the crop and get rid of all the equipment.

URRY: But the criminals get away, and no good police officer wants to see that happen. It's not just the city of Derby feeling the strain. Chief Constable Mick Creedon says a shortfall in Government grants has meant the rest of his force is under stress.

CREEDON: Until very recently, our domestic violence staff were working at three times the national recommended workload. You know, my amount of high tech crime, my computers I'm examining for paedophile material and such like is going through the roof. It's a 35-45% increase year on year, yet it's hard for me to resource that material that's coming in all the time.

URRY: We've seen some of how this extra workload plays out in such things as the Probation Service and Social Services over the years, haven't we, where dreadful things can happen on the end of it?

CREEDON: It does, and you know, I wouldn't want anyone to think that we're not capable of providing a good and efficient service. We are and we're very proud of what we do. But the demands on policing are growing all the time, you know, the threat from terrorism is a really major threat that all forces are dealing with in one way or another. We're now trying to work against the organised crime threats across the UK - areas like public protection and cases like the Baby P case bring it really home to everyone's focus straightaway. They bring an increasing threat, so perversely, at a time when headline crime is going down, we're seeing some of the demands on policing going up.

URRY: So what's the problem with Derbyshire's funding? According to Mr Creedon, it's a failure to pay out the full amount which should see him with £5 million a year more in his coffers.

CREEDON: We're now into the fifth year of the new funding formula and where we used to lose about £6 million or £6.5 million a year, we're now losing between £4.5 million and £5 million.

URRY: So why the delay then in the implementation of this formula?

CREEDON: Because the most difficult part is, there will need to be some forces, some police authorities that would lose significantly on what they have now. Now ...

URRY: But you're already losing, aren't you?

CREEDON: We are, and my argument exactly is that, year on year, Derbyshire and other forces – Nottinghamshire, Leicestershire, West Midlands and others - are losing significantly, meaning that the people who live in those locations, as I do, are receiving a less police service in terms of the amount it gets from the national allocation formula. We're anything between 100-200 or even 600-700 down on other similar forces of our nature. Now, with my police officer numbers of 2,100 you can imagine the difference that makes.

URRY: Policing Minister David Hanson is offering a sympathetic ear, a review of the formula in the future, but nothing further. What do you say to the Chief constable of Derbyshire then, who makes the point that, under the formula, he's losing out year on year between £4.5 million and £6 million a year less than your formula says he's entitled to?

HANSON: I know Mick in Derbyshire, I know the concerns that he's raised, and what we've done in relation to Derbyshire is to ensure that they've had the minimum increases in grant for all forces of 2.5%. That gives certainty across the board for all forces, no matter what.

URRY: Well that's fair enough, but how come he's up to £6 million a year down on his budget every year since this new formula was worked out?

HANSON: Well, there's a whole range of complex factors in relation to how formulas are allocated, and I know that Derbyshire have not been very happy with that. All I can say, there's a bottom line increase for all police forces in England and Wales last year and next year of 2.5%, which is helping to maintain and increase provision in very difficult times, when inflation is much lower than the 2.5% we've provided for next year.

URRY: The Association of Chief Police Officers tells us that up to sixteen – one six – forces, that's more than a third of the total in England and Wales, are struggling because of this formula. That can't be acceptable, can it?

HANSON: Well, I can only say what I've said, which is we've said the formula will be reviewed, we are happy to receive representations, I am happy to discuss and sit down in the next few weeks with the Association of Chief Police Officers, but the formula is where it is now.

URRY: It doesn't sound like they're going to get much change out of you then.

HANSON: Well, I don't think they are on this case. I've got to live within my budget, I have to organise policing as a whole.

URRY: But with demands for policing on the rise, the Association of Chief Police Officers knows there are much bigger challenges to come. In the next spending round there'll be no more minimum increase, there'll be cuts. The President of ACPO, Sir Hugh Orde, has told File on 4 they'll go deep.

ORDE: This country is in recession – there is no more money for the public sector and I would confidently predict cuts in police budgets of 10-20% over the next few years, so we really have to focus on what is important, what keeps people safe, what works and what doesn't.

URRY: You say there's no more money available, so what are you going to stop doing?

ORDE: That's an extremely good question which is capturing the imagination of all my colleagues on a daily basis, indeed I have a conference with them in the near future to look at exactly that issue. What they are doing is looking at driving out efficiencies from the back office. They are looking at amalgamating tasks across areas, across different police forces to become more efficient, so major inquiry teams will cover more than one county, for example. Human resource functions, finance functions, anything we can do to protect the front line will be done.

URRY: But Sir Hugh argues there's a major impediment to being able to deliver that. ACPO wants the number of forces across England and Wales to shrink, by amalgamation. It says this would make efficiencies far more coherent and effective. In fact, it's been tried before, but foundered, according to chief officers because of a lack of political will. The consequences of that were cushioned by the good times for the service, with funding reaching record levels. But now the chips are down - the police have to make major savings if they are to maintain service on a shrinking budget at a time of increased demand and expectation. But according to Sir Hugh Orde, the spanner in the works is the imbalance in grant allocation under the Home Office formula.

ORDE: Some forces are better funded than others, so if you're looking at an amalgamation between say a rich force and a less rich force, all sorts of politics predictably play in that world, which is why it requires central leadership to iron out those issues, to focus on frontline service delivery, to focus on protecting the public and to look at a structure that does that better.

URRY: So unless the Government gets its act together over this formula and sorts out this business about winners and losers, that's going to be a serious impediment, isn't it, to the amalgamation plans that you've got to take the service forward?

ORDE: It will be, you're right on that. Indeed, I was at a regional meeting of chief officer colleagues a couple of weeks ago where this was exactly the point. They were doing their very best to create a more organised structure within a number of forces, but the problem was some forces could not find the funding that other forces could. So I do think it needs to be looked at from a strategic level. I have raised it in my current role as President of the Association of Chief Police Officers with every political party, and I do not detect any political will to deliver this in the foreseeable future.

URRY: Policing Minister David Hanson says he has got a plan which he's about to publish, but it's not going to go as far as Sir Hugh and ACPO want.

HANSON: We will be producing, in about the next three to four weeks, a new White Paper on the future of policing between 2011 and 2015. Within that we'll be addressing some of the issues around amalgamation of forces, and I want to set down a framework which says that on a voluntary basis forces can amalgamate if they so wish.

URRY: It sounds like you've been putting this off a long time, and what I'm hearing now is, well, we're going to have a bit of a look at this in the future. This wants action now, doesn't it?

HANSON: I would expect that there'll be fewer police forces at the end of the White Paper period than there are at the start of the White Paper period, but I actually don't want to do what we did three or four years ago, which is force forces to merge.

URRY: Why does Sir Hugh Orde tell us that he can find no political will to get to grips with this issue of amalgamation when you're now saying, well don't worry, we're going to get it all sorted out?

HANSON: Well, our political will is to allow local people to determine what they want to do, because the political difficulty we had three years ago was there was central direction and local people kicked against it. We need to make sure that we look at forces, we look at how we deal with those, and we do it with local people working on those issues.

URRY: And while all that's being thrashed out, major spending cuts are looming. The postcode policing issues we've been investigating in this programme show there's already a gap between what police need and what they get in a significant number of forces. If the funding issues which are standing in the way of amalgamation and the savings that would bring aren't sorted out soon, that gap will get wider and deeper.

SIGNATURE TUNE

