

briefing

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Action Stations

Improving the Management of the Police Estate

Police stations are a visible form of reassurance for the public and remain at the hub of operational policing, but the estate as a whole is struggling to keep pace with changing demands and public expectations.

- many buildings are now in the wrong place to support police operations
- an increasing number of stations are outdated and unable to cope with modern technology; 87 per cent are more than 20 years old
- many stations are not conveniently situated for the public

Police buildings are worth £2.6 billion and cost £170 million a year to run, but their management and maintenance have been neglected.

- 40 per cent of forces have not reviewed their buildings to assess how well they meet operational needs
- opportunities to generate income and reduce costs through rationalisation are being missed
- repairs costing at least £205 million are needed to bring buildings up to standard
- not all forces have a sufficiently professional and rigorous estate management function



Better estate management will help deliver more effective policing...

- in some forces, up to one-third of space is used for non-operational purposes, such as recreational facilities and canteens
- audits of space usage can identify under-used or unsuitable buildings
- innovative approaches to sharing facilities with other forces, local agencies and emergency services can improve partnerships

...save money...

- assets worth over £110 million have been declared as surplus but not yet been sold

- energy efficiency measures could yield annual savings of £6 million – equivalent to 180 extra police officers

...and better serve the public.

- most public contact now takes place by telephone; less than 10 per cent of visitors to police stations are reporting a crime or accident
- many communities would be better served by public enquiry facilities located in shopping centres or on housing estates
- there is scope for greater use of internet and video links to interface with the public

The police service faces new challenges.

- it must secure 2 per cent efficiency gains each year from 1999/2000
- the Crime and Disorder Act calls for improved joint working between agencies
- new communications technology will change the way that police buildings are used

Good asset management offers both financial and operational benefits. Police forces and authorities must extract better value from their buildings before the passage of time turns them into liabilities.



**AUDIT
COMMISSION**

Promoting the best use of public money

Modernising the police estate

1. For many people, the traditional police station is a tangible reminder of the police's presence, a source of reassurance second only to the sight of a 'bobby on the beat'. But some stations are more than a century old – only 13 per cent of the stock has been built in the last 20 years [EXHIBIT 1] – and many are in poor repair. Meanwhile, the nature and geography of neighbourhoods, and patterns of crime, have altered dramatically. Policing styles have also changed, with a greater need for rapid response and an investment in 'behind the scenes' intelligence-gathering.

2. Many police buildings occupy prime plots in the centre of commercial areas; the estate is valued at around £2.6 billion. Some buildings are suitably located, adequately equipped to meet the demands of modern policing, and are well used by the public. Others hinder operational effectiveness – for example, because they are a long way from policing trouble spots, or because key facilities such as custody cells are inadequate [EXHIBIT 2]. And there is a worrying repairs backlog of at least £205 million. Police authorities and forces now face a real challenge – to develop an estate fit for the next century despite growing pressures on their capital and revenue budgets.

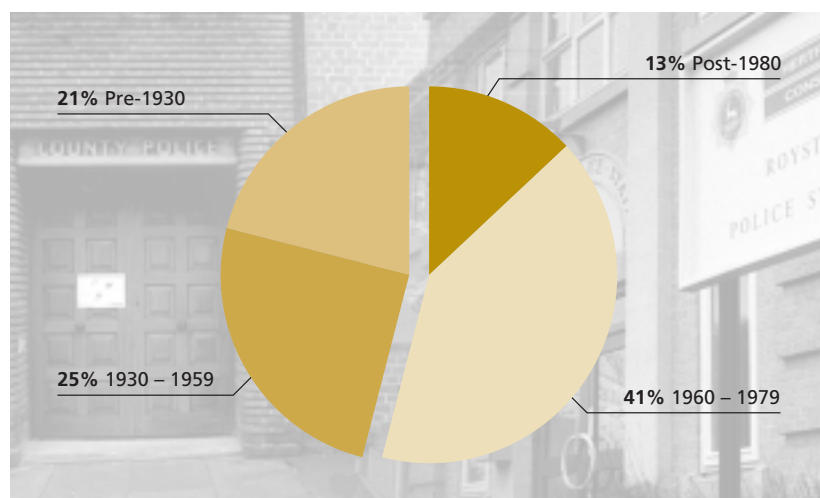
3. Meeting this challenge requires strategic thinking about the purpose of police buildings – *is there still a role for the traditional police station?* – and improvements in day-to-day estate management – for example, making better use of space or reducing energy bills. From April 1999, police authorities must secure 2 per cent efficiency gains year on year. Many will look to their estate to help achieve this target, but first both authorities and forces need to:

- understand and manage public expectations;
- close the gap between operational requirements and the existing estate; and
- address weaknesses in asset management.

EXHIBIT 1

Age profile of the police estate

Some 46 per cent of police buildings were constructed before 1960.



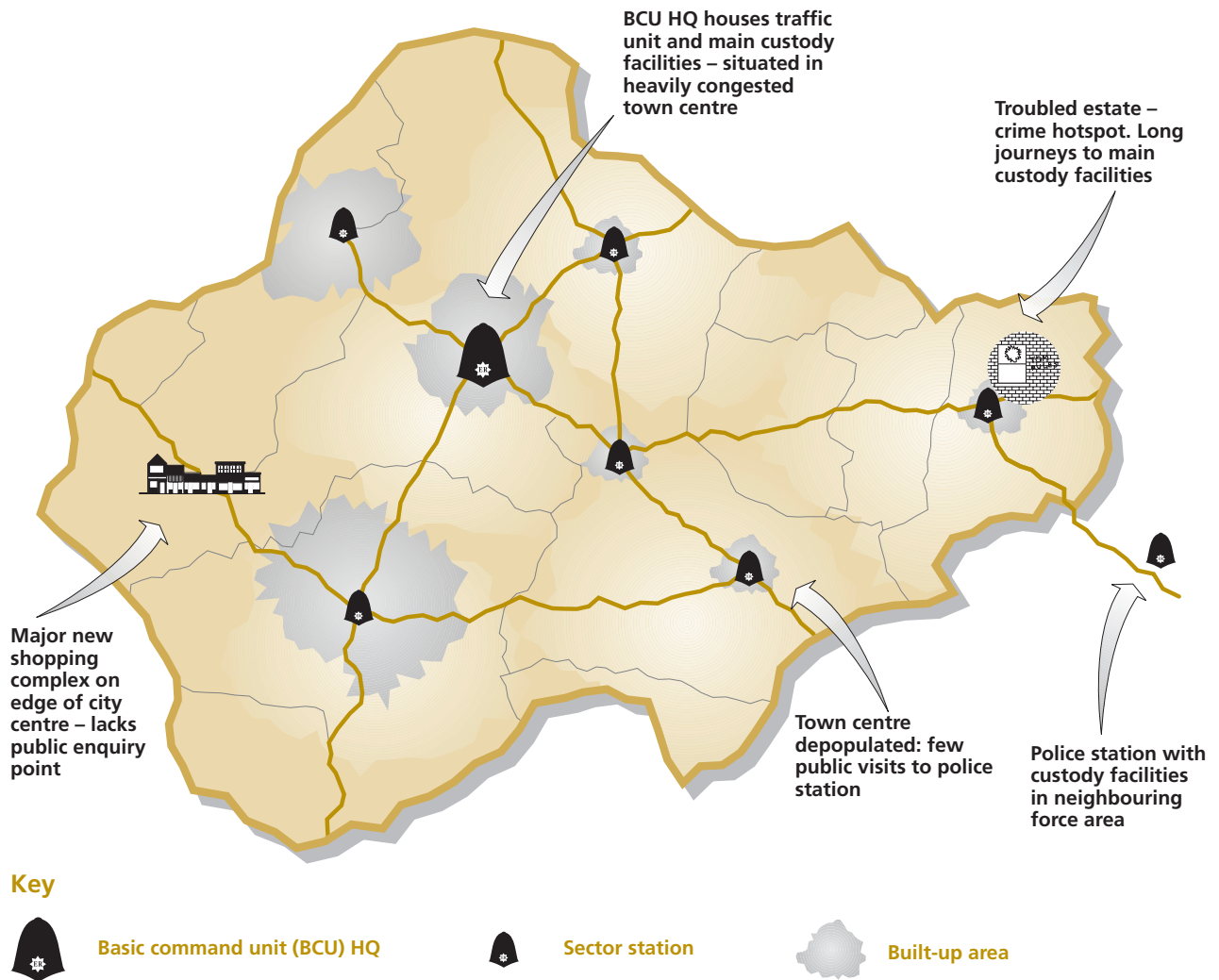
Source: Audit Commission national questionnaire

Some stations are more than a century old...and many are in poor repair

EXHIBIT 2

Illustrative example of police locations

Changes in patterns of crime, together with new housing, retail or transport developments, can mean that police stations are no longer in the most convenient locations either for public or police access. Often, practical difficulties prevent forces using facilities in neighbouring forces.



Source: Audit Commission

Police contacts with the public

4. Staffed public interface points – typically police station front counters – are a vital element of policing services but may not be required in all current locations. Police officers are more accessible when they are in centres of daytime activity – such as shopping centres, near schools or on housing estates – rather than in police stations. The majority of crimes or concerns are now reported over the telephone; less than 10 per cent of visitors to stations are reporting a crime or accident. Many visitors

want directions – these callers might be diverted if a town map were displayed outside the building. Many stations are not conveniently located, but alternatives such as video or internet links are still uncommon.

5. Proposals to close police stations invariably meet public opposition, and this is cited as a reason for inaction or delay. Improving public consultation would help to promote informed debate on the role of police

stations, now and in the future. Information about services should be accompanied by efforts to educate the public about what is effective and affordable. Public opposition to police station closures is often based on a perception that the quality of service will decline and, especially, that there will be fewer police officers on the beat. In fact, closing stations or contracting opening times can release officers for more patrol.

Matching the estate with the demands of operational policing

6. Effective asset management should be linked with the force's operational needs. Key questions include, *What do we need this building for? How well does it contribute to core policing work?* Answers can inform a cost-benefit analysis, weighing the costs of poorly located or unsuitable buildings against the costs and benefits of changing use, selling properties or moving functions. Overall, force property managers consider that 9 per cent of their buildings are in the 'wrong' location and 16 per cent have insufficient or excessive space for existing functions.

7. Not all forces are looking sufficiently ahead to prepare for the impact of future policing changes on their estates. Forces rely increasingly on information technology to record and detect crime and for everyday communication, but its application is hampered by old or unsuitable buildings. The growth of specialist crime and intelligence squads has led to an increased requirement for space, especially in headquarters buildings. And there is a shortage of storage space in some places. On the other hand, more cells exist than are needed, but many of these are in the wrong location and have few alternative uses.

What do we need this building for? How well does it contribute to core policing work?

Getting to grips with asset management

8. The police estate comprises 2,700 operational sites and around 4,000 residential units – running costs in 1997/98 were £170 million. The costs of poor asset management can be significant – under-used space, uneconomic buildings and large repair bills – and opportunities to rationalise the estate are being missed. The current picture reveals:

- *poor use of space:* audits in 12 fieldwork stations identified spare capacity that averaged 16 per cent of floor space. In some forces, one-third of total space is used for non-operational purposes such as recreational facilities, canteens and gyms [EXHIBIT 3];

- *failure to rationalise:* assets valued at £110 million have been declared surplus but have not yet been sold. There is scope for further sales. Government rules on the application of capital receipts used to offer little incentive to rationalise, but this is no longer the case;
- *significant variation in running costs:* if all forces could improve energy efficiency to match the performance of the top 25 per cent, annual savings of £6 million would result – enough to put around 180 extra police officers on the beat;

- *inadequate management information:* for example, fewer than 30 per cent of sites have been subject to space audits; few forces hold cost information on individual buildings; and
- *deteriorating physical condition of stock:* many buildings are in poor condition and need expensive repairs to bring them to acceptable standards. And yet most forces have cut their planned maintenance budgets in recent years.

9. A useful mechanism for combining these factors is an asset management plan. Its core elements include stock condition data; costed maintenance priorities (highlighting essential and urgent work); audits to identify under-used space; and policies on the provision of facilities – operational ones such as control rooms and amenities such as canteens and bars. Where estate services are obtained from external providers, proper contractual arrangements are required: at present a few forces purchase local authority services without a written agreement.

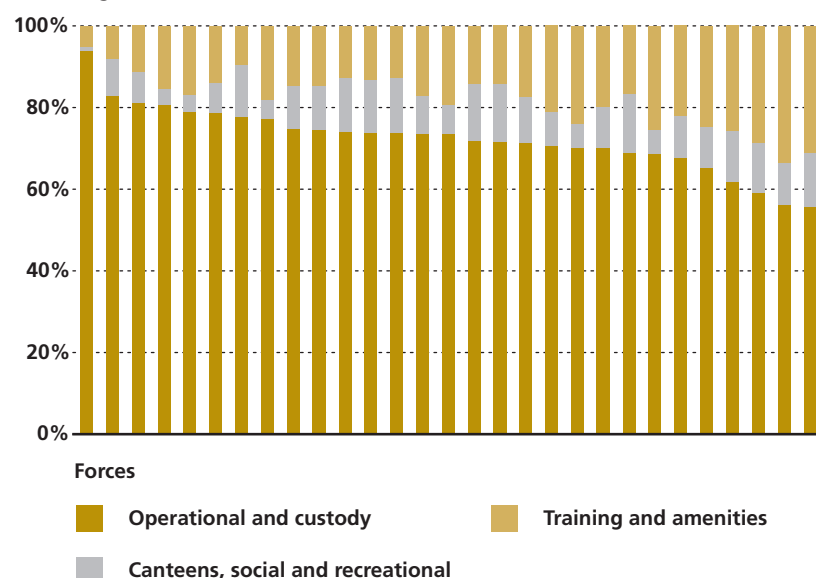
10. If the police estate is to be sustainable over the next 20 years there needs to be flexibility in building design, moves towards leasing rather than owning and rational collaboration. Facilities such as firearms ranges and ‘skid pans’ for driver training should be shared more extensively. Staff who are out of the office for significant periods can ‘hot-desk’, using work stations and personal lockers. But flexibility needs to be underpinned by professional and rigorous asset management.

EXHIBIT 3

Space utilisation

In some forces, operational functions occupy less than 60 per cent of the total space available.

Percentage of internal floor area



Source: Audit Commission national questionnaire

Conclusion

11. The police service has successfully adopted new styles of policing while improving the quality of its service. But the pressure to secure continuous improvement in economy, efficiency and effectiveness is relentless. The potential of better asset management both to secure savings and to improve service delivery has been neglected. Redressing this will help to achieve the 2 per cent efficiency gain targets set for 1999/2000 onwards [BOX A]. A 'win-win' situation is possible – reducing costs and enhancing performance – while taking significant steps to meet the demands of policing in a new millennium.

BOX A

Summary of recommendations for police authorities and forces

1. Prepare a property strategy and review it regularly. Strengthen links between operational and property strategies.
2. Rationalise operational and residential stock.
3. Assess the most suitable locations for public contact points; seek the views of local people on how they would prefer to access police services.
4. Improve partnership working and seek opportunities to share buildings and facilities with other forces and other public agencies.
5. Undertake regular reviews of space utilisation to maximise the use of available space: explore innovative ways of using space.
6. Establish and maintain a comprehensive and integrated property database.
7. Monitor running costs and space utilisation in individual buildings, and set targets for improvement.
8. Introduce or strengthen financial incentives for budget-holders to use space more efficiently.
9. Review the arrangements for providing or purchasing estate services so as to ensure best value. Introduce written contracts where there are currently none.

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If you want to know more:
the full national report, **Action Stations:
Improving the Management of the
Police Estate** looks at all these issues in
more detail and includes background
information, case studies and specific
guidance.
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Audit Commission, **Action Stations:
Improving the Management of the
Police Estate** (national report)

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