



Professionalism and Performance? A Critical Analysis of Police Leadership in England and Wales Following the 2026 Police Leadership Commission Report

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Commentary

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Abstract

The publication of Professionalism and Performance: Police Leadership for the Future by the Police Leadership Commission represents the most comprehensive review of police leadership in England and Wales for a generation. The report presents a paradoxical assessment of policing, identifying both examples of exemplary leadership and systemic weaknesses that undermine organisational effectiveness and public confidence. This article critically examines the state of police leadership through the lens of the Commission's findings and wider leadership literature. It argues that although British policing continues to benefit from a strong public service ethos, operational expertise and a tradition of policing by consent, these strengths are increasingly constrained by inadequate leadership development, fragmented workforce planning, risk-averse organisational cultures and declining legitimacy. The article evaluates the Commission's recommendations and concludes that while its proposals offer a credible framework for reform, meaningful transformation will depend upon sustained investment, cultural change and a renewed commitment to evidence-based leadership development.

Keywords: Police Leadership; UK Policing; Professionalism; A Critical Analysis of Police Leadership; England and Wales; 2026 Police Leadership Commission Report; Performance

Commentary

Police leadership has rarely been subjected to the level of scrutiny currently evident across England and Wales. High-profile scandals, declining public confidence, increasing workforce pressures and unprecedented demands on police organisations have generated increasing concern about the capacity of leaders to navigate the complex challenges facing contemporary policing. Against this backdrop, the Police Leadership Commission's report Professionalism and Performance: Police Leadership for the Future constitutes the most substantial review of police leadership for more

than a generation. Drawing upon evidence from thousands of officers, staff, academics, stakeholders and members of the public, the Commission reached a stark conclusion: police leadership is not consistently effective enough to deliver the quality of service that the public deserves [1].

Leadership occupies a unique position within policing. Unlike many professions, police leaders must exercise coercive authority on behalf of the state while simultaneously maintaining public consent and legitimacy. Consequently, leadership effectiveness extends beyond operational performance and directly influences organisational culture,

staff wellbeing, public trust and democratic accountability. Reiner R [2] argues that policing operates within a fundamentally political environment, requiring leaders to balance competing demands while maintaining impartiality and legitimacy. The Commission's findings suggest that this balancing act has become increasingly difficult in a social and political environment characterised by heightened scrutiny, declining trust in institutions and rapidly evolving forms of criminality [1].

Yet the Commission does not portray policing as a service devoid of leadership capability. On the contrary, evidence gathered throughout the inquiry identified numerous examples of outstanding leadership at all ranks. Police officers and staff continue to work in environments characterised by risk, uncertainty and emotional trauma. Many of those occupying leadership positions demonstrate remarkable resilience and a strong commitment to public service.

This reflects what Perry JL [3] describe as public service motivation, whereby individuals are driven by a desire to contribute positively to society rather than solely by personal advancement. Such commitment remains one of policing's greatest strengths and provides an important foundation for future reform.

Operational expertise also remains a significant asset. The traditional policing career pathway ensures that many senior leaders possess substantial frontline experience which contributes to their credibility and understanding of operational realities. Silvestri M [4] notes that legitimacy within police organisations remains strongly linked to operational competence, a factor that distinguishes policing from many other public sector professions. The Commission repeatedly encountered examples of leaders whose practical experience enabled effective decision-making in high-pressure situations and contributed to positive outcomes for communities.

Furthermore, British policing has demonstrated a capacity for innovation that is often overlooked within critical analyses. Over recent decades, policing has increasingly embraced evidence-based approaches to crime reduction and organisational improvement. Sherman LW [5] argues that evidence-based policing represents one of the most significant developments in modern law enforcement, encouraging decision-making informed by robust research rather than tradition alone. The Commission observed examples of leaders engaging successfully with technological innovation, digital investigation methods and data-driven approaches to operational policing. Such developments suggest that, despite criticisms, elements of police leadership remain adaptive and future-focused.

However, these strengths coexist with significant weaknesses. The most striking conclusion of the Commission concerns the inconsistency of leadership quality across forces. No police force was graded as "outstanding" for leadership and force management during the most recent HMICFRS inspection cycle, while a substantial proportion required improvement. Workforce perceptions were equally concerning, with only a minority of officers reporting confidence that they worked within well-led organisations.

Such findings raise important questions about the ability of policing to generate consistently effective leadership across a highly fragmented system.

Central to this problem is the longstanding underinvestment in leadership development. Perhaps the most frequently cited statistic within the Commission's findings is the comparison between leadership training in policing and the military. Whereas military officers receive extensive, structured leadership education throughout their careers, equivalent police leaders often receive only a handful of weeks of formal leadership development. The Commission identifies this disparity as evidence of a broader failure to prioritise leadership as a professional capability requiring systematic cultivation. This finding resonates strongly with contemporary leadership scholarship. Yukl G [6] argues that effective leadership is developed through sustained learning, reflection and experience rather than emerging automatically through time served. The assumption that operational competence naturally translates into leadership capability appears increasingly difficult to sustain.

The consequences of this underinvestment are particularly visible among first-line supervisors. Sergeants occupy a pivotal role within police organisations, acting as the primary link between senior management and frontline officers. Research consistently demonstrates that immediate supervisors exert considerable influence over organisational culture, employee wellbeing and performance outcomes [6]. Nevertheless, the Commission found widespread dissatisfaction amongst sergeants regarding their preparation for promotion and the lack of subsequent leadership support. Many described feeling ill-equipped for supervisory roles and burdened by administrative responsibilities that reduced their ability to mentor and develop staff effectively.

Alongside deficiencies in leadership development, the Commission identifies deeper cultural challenges. A recurring theme throughout the evidence was the emergence of risk-averse organisational cultures characterised by excessive bureaucracy and an overreliance on formal processes. Officers frequently described environments in which compliance had become more important than innovation

and where leaders were reluctant to take considered risks for fear of criticism, complaints or disciplinary action. Such findings mirror Reason's distinction between learning organisations and blame cultures. High-performing organisations create conditions in which individuals can challenge assumptions, admit mistakes and pursue innovation. By contrast, organisations dominated by fear and procedural compliance inevitably constrain leadership effectiveness and organisational learning.

Perhaps most concerning is the impact these leadership shortcomings have had on trust and legitimacy. Public confidence in policing has declined significantly over the last decade, while numerous high-profile misconduct cases have focused attention on organisational culture and ethical leadership. Tyler TR [5] procedural justice theory suggests that legitimacy depends not simply upon effectiveness but upon perceptions of fairness, transparency and respectful treatment. The Commission's findings suggest that leadership failures have undermined many of these foundations. Public focus groups repeatedly highlighted concerns that police leaders appeared disconnected from communities and insufficiently accountable for organisational failings.

Questions of representation and inclusion further complicate this picture. While progress has been made in increasing female representation within senior ranks, ethnic minority representation remains significantly below population levels and many participants described experiences of discrimination and exclusion. The Commission argues that leadership systems have too often rewarded those who fit established organisational norms, limiting diversity of thought and reducing opportunities for challenge and innovation. This finding reflects wider concerns within organisational literature regarding the importance of diverse leadership teams. Page argues that diversity strengthens problem-solving and decision-making by introducing different perspectives and experiences, a principle especially relevant in public organisations serving increasingly diverse communities.

It is within this context that the Commission's recommendations must be evaluated. The proposal to establish a National Academy of Police Leadership represents the most significant structural reform. The academy would centralise responsibility for leadership development, succession planning, workforce analysis, promotion standards and leadership research.

Such a model draws heavily upon successful approaches found within the military and healthcare sectors, where national leadership institutions support consistency, professionalism and evidence-based development. The proposal reflects broader public leadership literature which

emphasises the importance of institutional support for leadership capability rather than reliance upon individual initiative alone [7].

Similarly, recommendations concerning career-long learning, leadership networks, a dedicated fast stream scheme and reform of promotion processes represent attempts to replace fragmented local arrangements with a coherent national framework. Of particular significance is the Commission's emphasis on evaluating leadership performance through annual reviews, continuous professional development and structured talent management. Such reforms would move policing closer to recognised professional models found in medicine, education and other public services.

Ultimately, the Police Leadership Commission presents a vision of policing that places leadership at the centre of organisational effectiveness. Its diagnosis is uncomfortable but persuasive. The report demonstrates that leadership weaknesses are not isolated problems but systemic issues affecting performance, culture, legitimacy and workforce wellbeing simultaneously. Yet the findings also reveal considerable existing strengths upon which future improvement can be built. Policing continues to attract dedicated individuals with a strong commitment to public service, and many examples of excellent leadership already exist throughout the service.

The challenge for policing is therefore not the absence of leadership talent but the absence of a system capable of identifying, developing and sustaining that talent consistently. Leadership can no longer be viewed as a by-product of operational experience alone. If policing is to address future challenges, restore public confidence and maintain legitimacy within an increasingly complex environment, leadership development must become a strategic priority. The Commission provides a blueprint for achieving this transformation; whether policing can deliver upon that vision remains one of the most important questions facing the profession over the coming decade.

Specifically, What Can Universities and Higher Education Do to Support the Development of Police Leadership?

A strong argument emerging from the Police Leadership Commission is that universities should not simply be providers of police entry programmes but become strategic partners in leadership development throughout an officer's career. The report explicitly calls for an "enduring partnership between policing and higher education" and proposes that the National Academy of Police Leadership should be co-led by academics and practitioners.

Universities have five principal strands to contribute towards. First, universities can support the professionalisation of police leadership through evidence-informed education. A recurring criticism within the Commission is that leadership development is inconsistent, underdeveloped and often disconnected from contemporary organisational challenges. Universities possess expertise in leadership theory, organisational psychology, change management, ethics, public administration and strategic leadership. These disciplines are routinely taught within healthcare, military and corporate leadership programmes but remain underutilised in policing. By designing leadership curricula that integrate theory with operational practice, universities can help move leadership development beyond learning through experience alone.

Second, universities can act as centres of leadership research and evaluation. The Commission repeatedly highlights the absence of robust evaluation of leadership programmes and the lack of evidence regarding what actually develops effective police leaders. Universities are uniquely positioned to address this gap through longitudinal research, independent programme evaluation and knowledge exchange. Similar to the Centre for Army Leadership at Sandhurst, a university-police partnership could generate a substantial evidence base concerning leadership behaviours, organisational culture, workforce wellbeing, legitimacy and performance outcomes. This would allow leadership development investments to be informed by empirical evidence rather than tradition or anecdote.

Third, universities can support career-long learning and continuous professional development. One of the key recommendations of the Commission is the creation of professional digital passports and a system of recognised learning across an officer's career. Universities could provide accredited learning opportunities at every leadership stage, from supervisory development courses for sergeants through to postgraduate qualifications for senior leaders. Importantly, this need not mean every officer studies for a degree. Instead, universities can offer modular provision, micro-credentials, professional certificates and postgraduate credits that recognise workplace learning while supporting leadership progression.

Fourth, universities can contribute to improving diversity and representation within policing leadership. The Commission identifies persistent barriers affecting officers from underrepresented groups and notes that leadership systems frequently reproduce existing organisational norms. Universities have extensive experience in widening participation, mentoring, coaching and leadership development programmes targeted at diverse groups. Through collaborative initiatives, universities can help

identify talent earlier, support aspiring leaders and contribute to more inclusive leadership pathways. Such interventions would also support broader organisational goals relating to legitimacy and community representation.

Fifth, universities can provide external challenge and critical reflection. One of the recurring criticisms within the report is that policing can become insular, with promotion, talent identification and leadership development often shaped by existing organisational assumptions. Universities bring an external perspective that can challenge established practices and introduce new ideas from healthcare, military leadership, education and the wider public sector. This external scrutiny is particularly valuable in addressing issues of organisational culture, ethics and innovation.

From a broader perspective, universities should view policing as a mature profession requiring the same leadership infrastructure found in medicine, education, nursing and the military. Just as NHS leaders access structured leadership programmes through the NHS Leadership Academy and military officers benefit from continuous development through institutions such as Sandhurst, police leaders require a similarly rigorous educational ecosystem. The Commission's vision of a National Academy of Police Leadership offers an opportunity for universities to become central partners in shaping the next generation of police leaders through education, research, evaluation and professional development.

In essence, the Commission suggests that universities should evolve from being providers of police education to becoming strategic partners in the creation of a professional police leadership system. Such a role would place higher education at the heart of police reform and contribute directly to improving organisational effectiveness, public trust and leadership capability across policing. To close higher education is ready, is policing ready to work and accept help from others?

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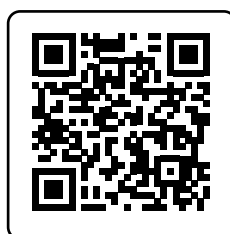
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