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Police may scrap scheme to keep tabs on activists



📷 Sir Hugh Orde, president of the Association of Chief Police Officers (Acpo) acknowledged public disquiet over the way police are gathering data on thousands of activists and protesters. Photograph: Paul Faith/PA

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The head of Britain's police chiefs has said that a scheme to monitor political campaigners may be scrapped as part of plans to make national policing more accountable.

In his first major interview since taking office, Sir Hugh Orde, president of the Association of Chief Police Officers (Acpo), acknowledged public disquiet over the way his units are gathering data on thousands of activists and said the scheme "can go tomorrow", although he said some form of monitoring of protesters would need to continue, with independent regulation.

Senior police officers from all 44 forces in England, Wales and Northern Ireland will meet to discuss his proposals tomorrow. The discussions could result in Acpo becoming a statutory body, and could mean parts of the organisation, such as those responsible for monitoring so-called "domestic extremists", are sponsored by the Home Office and ultimately answerable to parliament.

Denis O'Connor, the chief inspector of constabulary, is expected to call for major reform of Acpo's domestic extremism units in a major report into the policing of protest later this month. His inspectors believe Acpo has fallen victim to mission creep, taking on "quasi-operational" national policing functions that lack proper accountability.

But Orde said he was "ahead of the curve" on reform of Acpo, and would ask parliament to introduce greater regulation. "I have no difficulty with some accountability, some oversight model, on the bits of business which the public are worried about," he said. "I think that is around data, around operational stuff - where it is on the fringes of 'this could interfere with my life'."

Declaring that "change is what I do", Orde told the Guardian he plans to transform Acpo, which has functioned as private members' club for top ranking officers for almost a century.

He said he would open parts of the organisation to government regulation and, in a significant move, would look to make his organisation a public body.

Promising to use his post to work as "the voice of the profession" - a role that he emphasised must be kept independent of ministers - Orde said Acpo had amassed an array of "add-on" responsibilities in recent years that were not core to its role.

Acpo receives about £22m in grants from the Home Office to advise ministers and forces, and has a commercial wing that generates about £18m, but its rapid expansion over the last decade has taken place without parliamentary debate.

Last month the Guardian revealed Acpo was running a £9m scheme to help keep tabs on political activists categorised as "domestic extremists", a term with no legal basis. Three secretive units, which employ a staff of 100 and also advise companies that are the targets of protest, are controlled by Acpo's terrorism and allied matters division, which Orde described as "a huge piece of business".

They include the National Public Order Intelligence Unit (NPOIU), a national database that stores information on thousands of so-called domestic extremists, information which is made available to forces.

Orde said the units were not conducting blanket surveillance operations during all mass protests, but said he could understand the concerns of members of the public who are photographed by the teams that monitor protests and pass on their intelligence to the NPOIU.

He said he would consider losing the three units but, if senior officers decided they should remain within Acpo, an independent regulator should be created to hold them to account.

Acpo has been criticised for raising money from lucrative offshoots including Acro, a commercial division that sells criminal record checks using the police national computer, and a separate company that charges manufacturers to give an Acpo seal of approval to crime prevention products such as burglar alarms.

Law and Orde

Out-of-court penalties are an effective means of dealing with crime that could keep tens of thousands of people from clogging the court system, Sir Hugh Orde said. Defending fixed penalty notices and cautions, which the government said this week are under review, Orde said they were an efficient way of dealing with low-level crime. He said he backed the review, which should bring "clarity and predictability". Some offences - such as those involving violence - must be dealt with by the courts, he said.

But he broke ranks with Sir Paul Stephenson, the Metropolitan police commissioner, who has said that pressure to keep prison numbers down has led to an "uncontrollable" increase in out-of-court sanctions. "I can honestly say I have never come under pressure to keep people out of court," Orde said. "To my knowledge, no chiefs have expressed concern over that."

He said out-of-court sanctions "stop people in their tracks". Evidence suggested that people who concede guilt and receive quick reprimands are unlikely to reoffend.

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