



Planes, drones and helicopters

An independent study of police air support

November 2017

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ISBN: 978-1-78655-589-2

www.justiceinspectors.gov.uk/hmicfrs

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Foreword

This report contains the findings and conclusions from our study of police air support, including those concerning the National Police Air Service (NPAS).

Over recent decades, there have been significant changes in police aviation. Between 1993 and 2009, the number of forces with access to air support more than doubled. The biggest change came in 2012, when NPAS was formed to centralise the provision of air support and make it more efficient.

Turning the concept of a national police air service into an operational reality has been a significant challenge. Meeting the needs of forces as diverse as the Metropolitan Police Service and Cumbria Constabulary was never going to be easy, and it has been made more challenging because forces have faced financial pressures to different degrees. Among those who lead police aviation, we have found high levels of skill, dedication and commitment. In particular, we recognise the major contributions made by the members of the NPAS National Strategic Board and especially by the current chief constable of West Yorkshire Police and the police and crime commissioner (PCC) for West Yorkshire. None of the comments contained in this report should be seen as critical of those who have made NPAS work since 2012.

However, there are some fundamental problems with NPAS. Savings have been made, but primarily as a result of cutting the service provided to forces. Some of the terms of the collaboration agreement upon which NPAS is founded are too restrictive, and leaders are not in possession of all the information and resources they require to assure long-term success.

We have made a number of recommendations that should be acted on quickly to improve existing structures. But if forces are to be provided with effective air support as efficiently as possible, arrangements need more fundamental reform. It would be difficult for us to conclude that NPAS has a sustainable future in its current form.

The aim must be an aviation service flexible enough to take advantage of new technology and able to provide a range of capabilities to meet the needs of the police service. We believe that a national collaboration can be an efficient and effective way of providing police air support. But a lot more work is needed to understand the nature and level of air support that individual police forces require. Once it is clearer what a national police air service needs to provide, it will be possible to design a service that is fit for purpose. This will take time, and, given the importance of air support, the work needs to start as quickly as possible.

HMI Matt Parr CB

HM Inspector of Constabulary

Summary

Introduction

We conduct inspections of police forces and other law enforcement agencies. Sometimes we also conduct another – more limited – form of inspection such as this study of police air support. We commissioned this study following concerns expressed by some forces about the effectiveness and efficiency of current arrangements for police air support, and to inform our understanding of operational police collaboration involving all territorial forces in England and Wales.

We conducted fieldwork for this study between January and March 2017, collecting information from police forces and local policing bodies in England and Wales and from NPAS, as well as from a range of other parties including the Home Office and the Civil Aviation Authority (CAA).

About police air support

Air support is obtained by police forces across England and Wales in several ways.

Most police air support is provided using helicopters operated by NPAS. Helicopters normally deploy with one pilot and two tactical flight officers, who use video and thermal imaging cameras to locate missing persons and track suspects, and radio systems to communicate with officers on the ground. The majority of air support is provided in connection with crimes in action, and about a quarter of deployments are to aid searches for missing persons.

In the past, some forces operated fixed-wing aircraft, and NPAS will soon be adding four fixed-wing aircraft to its fleet. Fixed-wing aircraft can be used for many of the tasks that police helicopters undertake: they offer additional advantages, such as longer flying times and lower running costs. For some kinds of work, however, a helicopter is more suitable.

Most police forces also obtain air support using unmanned aerial vehicles, more commonly known as drones. These are not currently operated by NPAS but are deployed either by the force concerned, by a partner force (e.g. within a regional collaboration) or by a partner agency (e.g. the local fire and rescue service).

Finally, forces are also able to obtain aerial imagery produced using satellites. Because this is generally available via the internet free of charge, we have not examined this type of imagery in any detail during this study.

About NPAS

NPAS currently operates a fleet of 19 helicopters, of which we were told between 10 and 14 are likely to be available on any given day. A map of NPAS base locations is available in Appendix A. In 2016/17, NPAS aircraft clocked up 17,800 flying hours – an average of just over two-and-a-half hours of flight time per aircraft for each 24-hour period. Most of these flying hours were spent assisting with searches (either for suspects or for missing people). Around 10 percent of requests for air support concerned an immediate risk to life.

NPAS provides air support under a collaboration agreement to the 43 territorial police forces in England and Wales and the British Transport Police. Each force contributes to the funding of the service based on the number of times it makes use of the helicopters.

It is important to draw a distinction between decisions made collectively through the National Police Chiefs' Council (NPCC) and by local policing bodies about the provision of police air support, and the daily operation of NPAS as a collaborative venture. NPAS is overseen by a National Strategic Board that currently includes eight chief police officers and seven local policing bodies respectively representing their peers, but the service is provided jointly by the PCC for West Yorkshire and the chief constable of West Yorkshire Police.

This means that the PCC for West Yorkshire owns or leases NPAS physical assets such as its aircraft, while the chief constable of West Yorkshire Police is responsible for the management of NPAS staff. The PCC and chief constable effectively provide a level of service that has been agreed through either direct consultation with forces and local policing bodies or indirect consultation via the NPAS National Strategic Board. For providing that service, the PCC receives capital funding from the Home Office and revenue funding from other local policing bodies on a not-for-profit basis, in accordance with the terms of a single collaboration agreement.

Judgments and recommendations

Performance

Judgment

- The level of service provided to many forces is lower than we expected to find, and many incidents are over before an aircraft can reach the scene.

Since 2009, the number of police aircraft has been reduced from 33 to 19 and there has been a reduction of about 45 percent in the number of hours flown. There is some evidence to suggest that police officers are making less use of air support because it takes too long to arrive. In 2016, helicopters were cancelled by forces during transit to an incident on over 40 percent of occasions, which frontline officers told us repeatedly was because incidents are often over before air support can arrive.

In 2016, NPAS met its response time targets, as it does every year. However, this says more about the nature of the targets than the speed of response. About 70 percent of calls for air support are allocated a target response time of 60 minutes, which in many cases is too slow to be useful. More than half of all forces had to wait an average of longer than half an hour for a helicopter to arrive once one had been requested from NPAS.

This is not just a consequence of the time it takes to travel to an incident. Performance information shows that, on average, it took more than 10 minutes to despatch an aircraft to the most urgent of calls and an average of almost 22 minutes to despatch an aircraft to a crime in action. We also found evidence that suggests that the way NPAS shift changes are scheduled has an adverse effect on aircraft availability at a particular time each day.

There are strong indications that the police service now operates insufficient aircraft to provide consistently prompt responses to incidents in all forces in England and Wales. Even if local policing bodies were willing to transfer funding from other areas of policing to NPAS, however, we would not necessarily recommend an increase in the size of the NPAS fleet. This is because further work is necessary to clarify the demand for air support, the relative importance of that demand, and what that air support is intended to achieve. We do, however, make the following recommendations with a view to improving the level of service provided to forces in the shorter and longer term.

Recommendations

- With immediate effect, the NPAS chief operating officer should review the impact of shift changes and consider staggering shift changeover times at NPAS bases, involving and informing forces throughout.
- As soon as practicable, the National Strategic Board should reinvigorate the development of NPAS performance reporting, including the balanced scorecard, to better demonstrate the contribution made by NPAS to force effectiveness and efficiency. NPAS should publish its performance information at national and force levels and include regional levels only when this adds clear value.
- By July 2018, the NPCC lead for air support should carry out and publish a review of the NPAS deployment process, including forces' compliance with guidance on the use of air support and the timeliness of NPAS decision making.

Financial efficiency

Judgment

- There is no clear evidence that current arrangements are financially any more or less efficient than when forces managed their own air support, and costs are not shared equitably between forces.

In 2008/09, the police service was operating 33 aircraft for an annual revenue cost of £45m, and initial calculations were that a national police air service could maintain a fleet of 29 helicopters for an annual revenue cost of £37.5m. In 2016/17, NPAS was operating 19 helicopters (with four fixed-wing aircraft still to come) with a revenue budget of £39.6m, an amount that represented a real-terms reduction in funding of about 28 percent since 2008/09. With each aircraft flying fewer hours on average, however, the cost per flying hour has doubled.

Before NPAS, forces used a range of different approaches for compiling information about operating and infrastructure costs. There is some evidence that the original estimates for operating a national police air service may have been too low. It is not clear that sufficient allowance was made for back-office costs or for the additional costs that arose when all bases moved to 24-hour, 7-day-a-week operation.

We believe a mandated collaboration like this can only secure the confidence of those who fund and use it if achievement of its formal objectives is clearly and consistently demonstrated. NPAS has an explicit objective of achieving “a lower cost service than a service which is procured and managed on a local basis”.

Any worthwhile assessment of whether this objective has been achieved would need to take account of the capital and revenue payments made to the lead local policing body, the level of service provided to forces, and the outcomes achieved. Good information is available about the payments and the service provided, but not about outcomes achieved; there has been very little focus on this, either before NPAS was set up or afterwards.

In the absence of detailed information about outcomes and the extent of any efficiencies gained through operating collaboratively, we can only conclude that there is no clear evidence that NPAS has provided either greater or lesser financial efficiency than would have been achieved if forces had continued to operate their own air support units.

The NPAS charging model apportions costs according to the number of attendances by NPAS aircraft, and this, among other factors, has meant NPAS is more affordable for some forces than for others. In some cases, the charging model creates a perverse incentive for forces to restrict their use of air support.

Finally, although the focus of NPAS operations is on response policing, NPAS also provides support for counter-terrorism purposes and some limited support to operations to combat serious and organised crime. More work is needed to ascertain how much of the NPAS budget is currently being spent in these areas. There is a specific issue in London, where the nature of policing the nation’s capital means there are requirements for air support that most forces do not have, at least not on the same scale.

The way that NPAS is provided with revenue funding is determined by the collaboration agreement – we shall return to this later. However, in relation to the support provided to the counter-terrorism network and for policing London, we make two recommendations.

Recommendations

- By March 2018, the National Strategic Board should facilitate the reaching of agreement between NPAS, the police counter-terrorism network and the Metropolitan Police Service on how security, counter-terrorism and armed policing deployments will be differentiated, to facilitate appropriate sharing of the full costs of NPAS services.
- From 2018/19 onwards, for financial purposes the National Strategic Board should treat the police counter-terrorism network as though it were a police force, and should recover all relevant revenue and capital costs for support provided to that network. The cost of counter-terrorism tasks undertaken in support of force-commanded operations, however, should normally be met by forces.

Financial sustainability

Judgment

- NPAS in its current form is financially unsustainable: the capital investment strategy has left NPAS without adequate funding to replace its ageing fleet of aircraft.

Capital investment in police air support has been reduced from approximately £12.5m a year before NPAS was set up to an average of about £11m a year. More than half of NPAS capital has been spent on parts for its aircraft and about a quarter on 'airframe credits', a scheme under which capital funding is used to purchase the aircraft that were transferred into NPAS from local policing bodies. Investment in new aircraft has declined dramatically, with funding used instead to upgrade existing aircraft. Given the increased maintenance costs associated with older aircraft, there is no clear evidence of whether this has been more efficient overall.

This approach has resulted in a number of aircraft nearing the end of their working lives without plans and funding for sufficient new aircraft being in place. Only now are plans being developed for dealing with this matter, and procurement of new aircraft will be a lengthy process.

Local policing bodies and chief officers rely on their peers on the NPAS National Strategic Board to represent their interests. Certain decisions made by the board – such as those concerning aircraft procurement and the location of operating bases – have a significant impact on the level of service individual forces receive. Before further procurement is approved, those who will be funding it should have a direct opportunity to express their views.

Recommendation

- Before submitting its proposed costed fleet replacement plan to the Home Office, the National Strategic Board should ensure that all forces and local policing bodies are adequately consulted on the plan's operational and financial implications.

The demand for police air support

Judgment

- The police service needs to develop a common understanding of the demand for air support and its contribution to police effectiveness and efficiency. Only then can shared, evidence-based decisions be made about the right mix of drones, helicopters and fixed-wing aircraft, and about collaboration with non-police partners.

Across policing, there is insufficient understanding of the demand for air support. To inform decisions on the size of a national aircraft fleet, the police need a better understanding of not only the patent demand for air support but also the latent demand arising from criminal behaviour and police activity. We found that while NPAS had good information about the level of patent demand (such as the number of calls for service), information was less readily available for latent demand (indicators for latent demand might include the national incidence of certain types of property or vehicle crime or the incidence of missing person reports).

Once there is a shared and detailed understanding of demand, chief officers and local policing bodies need to agree what air support is intended to achieve. Police forces vary widely in their use of air support, and the introduction of a national police air service has not led to consistent use of air support tactics by all forces. Some forces appear not to be using air support in circumstances in which others would.

The police service also needs to develop a clearer view of the purposes for which different types of aircraft, manned and unmanned, are best used. NPAS plans for the use of the four fixed-wing aircraft it is preparing for operation have not been clearly communicated to forces. Furthermore, while most forces have purchased drones, none has rigorously evaluated their use and, as a result, the police service has not

developed a common view on their relative merit as a form of police air support. This brings the risk that the service will lack the evidence base it needs to capitalise on the developments in drone capability that the government anticipates will occur in the coming years.

The police service routinely operates with a range of other public sector organisations, and although those organisations make limited use of air support at present, a better assessment of the potential for collaboration is needed.

Recommendations

- As soon as practicable, the NPCC lead for air support should commission an evaluation of the cost-effectiveness of police use of miniature and small drones, drawing on advice from the College of Policing and working with any other partners considered appropriate. This evaluation should produce an evidence base to inform subsequent guidance and decision making.
- By March 2018, NPAS should communicate to forces its plans for the use of fixed-wing aircraft. After a suitable period, there should be a review of their effectiveness and efficiency; adequate steps should be taken to correct any shortcomings revealed in the review.
- By July 2018, the NPCC lead for air support should oversee data collection and analysis in a limited number of forces (taking account of use of air support in proportion to population figures and any other readily available data), with a view to uncovering the reasons for differences in the use of air support tactics. Chief constables should use the results from this exercise to review their use of air support.
- The NPCC lead for air support should work with other relevant NPCC portfolio leads and NPAS to produce, by December 2018, a comprehensive assessment of latent and patent demand for air support. This assessment should take account of the development of force management statements and be repeated from time to time to inform decisions on the composition and deployment of the police aircraft fleet.
- By December 2018, the NPCC lead for air support should design a methodology that can be used at force, regional and national levels to assess the benefits and risks of collaboration on air support with other emergency services and public bodies such as Border Force and Immigration Enforcement, including collaboration on the use of drones.

Policy and guidance

Judgment

- There is no up-to-date police air support strategy, and there is scope for improvement in policy, guidance and communication on air support.

We found little recent strategic thinking across the police service on air support; a formal strategy review is several years overdue. In the absence of an up-to-date strategy, local policing bodies and chief officers have no framework within which to make decisions about investment in, or best use of, air support.

We found that limited guidance was available to officers on how and when to use air support, with insufficient mention of air support in College of Policing Authorised Professional Practice (APP). Communication about air support, whether about NPAS services or the use of drones, was patchy at best, inhibiting the effective use of existing assets and the development of new capabilities in force.

Recommendations

- By March 2018, the NPCC lead for air support should publish an interim operational strategy for all currently available forms of air support, including drones, and publish a plan to improve communication on police air support between frontline officers, police managers, NPAS, chief officers and the College of Policing.
- By July 2018, the Chief Constables' Council should establish a high-level outline of the operational outcomes that air support (in all its forms) should facilitate. This should inform the development, by March 2019, of a new air support strategy by the NPCC lead for air support in conjunction with local policing bodies and NPAS.
- Following analysis of force use of air support tactics and after receipt of subject matter expert advice through relevant NPCC portfolio leads, the College of Policing should update all references to air support in existing Authorised Professional Practice. The College should also update other APP modules identified after consultation with the NPCC lead for air support and NPAS, such as those concerning investigation and missing persons.

Strategic leadership of NPAS

Judgment

- Current NPAS governance arrangements are unsatisfactory: the mechanisms for collaborative decision making are inadequate, and having the PCC who is jointly responsible for providing NPAS services as chair of the main decision-making group inhibits accountability.

The NPAS collaboration agreement sets out arrangements for governance, although we found that these had not been entirely followed. The majority of chief and senior officers we spoke to were dissatisfied with current NPAS governance arrangements. The National Strategic Board is composed of competent and committed individuals who have, over recent years, amassed considerable experience of directing police aviation. But the National Strategic Board is not sufficiently independent of the lead local policing body for NPAS; the board's independence is a requirement of the collaboration agreement. Also, its mechanism for decision making (by simple majority voting) could be improved.

The collaboration agreement determines membership of the National Strategic Board. We found that the British Transport Police makes revenue contributions to NPAS in the same way as other forces, yet the force and its police authority currently have no voice on the board.

Responsibility for the governance of police air support is primarily divided between the National Police Chiefs' Council (NPCC) lead for air support, the members of the National Strategic Board, and the NPAS lead local chief constable and lead local policing body. If air support is to be improved, these parties must co-operate closely yet maintain professional distance. We believe that – especially in a mandated collaboration such as NPAS – it is necessary to keep the responsibility for strategy and policy development separate from that for operational performance.

Recommendations

- To enhance confidence in the ability of the National Strategic Board to set strategic direction and to oversee performance management, as soon as practicable, a local policing body member of the board other than the lead local policing body should be appointed as chair of the board.
- As soon as practicable, the collaboration agreement should be amended to permit a British Transport Police chief officer and a representative of the British Transport Police Authority to join the National Strategic Board as voting members. The National Strategic Board should also invite a British Transport Police officer to participate in the Independent Assurance Group.
- There should continue to be separation between strategic leadership on police air support and the day-to-day management of NPAS. Both require contributions from chief constables and local policing bodies, according to their statutory responsibilities. But at least in the short term, the roles of the chief officer leading NPCC policy development and the chief constable responsible for the operation of NPAS should continue to be filled by different individuals.

Future options

Judgment

- The lack of an up-to-date strategy for police air support, the apparent inconsistency in force tasking of air support, the lower than expected levels of support provided by NPAS, the challenges around NPAS financing, and weaknesses in governance lead us to conclude that police leaders urgently need to reconsider the arrangements for police air support.

We have considered how the existing arrangements for air support could be improved, and we have consulted with senior police leaders on how that might be done. Many, although not all, of the problems we have identified result from the way the existing NPAS collaboration has been designed and implemented:

- the collaboration agreement includes different appendices that contain contradictory definitions of priority;
- the performance targets set for NPAS are of little relevance to operational policing, which has led to misleading reporting of the service actually experienced by frontline officers;

- governance is hindered by the creation of six regions that correspond with neither borderless operating practices nor the current nine NPCC regions;
- there is a lack of clarity about the division of responsibilities between the lead local chief constable and the lead local policing body;
- forces face differing funding pressures, which makes it difficult to reach consensus on overall capacity, yet there is no longer a mechanism for each force to specify, or commit to, its own requirements;
- significant changes in NPAS policy and practice have not led to the agreement being updated, and the new method for providing NPAS with revenue has brought with it adverse consequences; and
- even though it is clearly foreseen by the agreement, the vital matter of fleet replacement has not been adequately progressed to date.

The current collaboration was designed before the creation of PCCs and at a time when drone technology was far less capable. Police thinking about the provision of specialist capabilities has also developed a great deal over the past few years.

We nevertheless believe that a single collaboration across England and Wales could offer an effective and efficient way of providing police air support. We see two main options for improving the current collaboration agreement: revising it, or starting afresh. Our considered view is that revision may not be practical, nor may it offer the opportunity to consider new forms of collaboration that could bring greater advantages at lesser risk. We recognise, however, that a great deal of work has gone into the existing collaboration, and it is only right that the chief officers and local policing bodies who are partners in the existing collaboration should decide for themselves how to proceed.

Recommendations

- Chief officers and local policing bodies should urgently consider options for revising or replacing the existing NPAS collaboration agreement, if necessary commissioning scoping work through the NPCC Specialist Capabilities Programme before agreeing how to proceed. Regardless of the form in which the collaboration is to exist in future, the intention should be to take account of the building-block pieces of work we have recommended and to have improved arrangements in place within no more than three years.
- The NPCC Specialist Capabilities Programme should co-ordinate activity so that, by March 2019, chief constables for all 44 forces contributing to NPAS are able to publish in a consistent format a detailed description of the air support each force requires.

Introduction

HMICFRS inspections and studies

We conduct inspections of police forces and other law enforcement agencies. Sometimes we conduct thematic inspections, such as the inspection of undercover policing we conducted in 2014.¹ Sometimes we also conduct another – more limited – form of inspection ("studies"), such as our 2015 study of digital crime and policing² and this study of police air support.

We tend to carry out studies of this nature when concerns about a particular aspect of policing have been raised, but there is not a clear set of standards or criteria against which to make a graded judgment of the kind we make in our PEEL inspections. Alternatively, or in addition, there may be a lack of consensus on whether inspection of all forces is required, or there may be a need to explore new or emerging issues in an important aspect of policing, or we may seek to improve HMICFRS' understanding in order to guide the development of our inspection programme.

In February 2016, as part of our annual consultation process,³ Simon Byrne QPM, the National Police Chiefs' Council (NPCC) lead for air support,⁴ asked us to consider undertaking an inspection of the National Police Air Service (NPAS).

We were aware that a number of forces had concerns about NPAS and that some forces had been investing in drones, partly as an alternative to using NPAS. We were also conscious that police leaders were considering options for providing other specialist policing capabilities, such as roads policing and forensic support.⁵

¹ HMICFRS publications may be found at www.justiceinspectorates.gov.uk/hmicfrs/publications/

² *Real lives, real crimes: a study of digital crime and policing*, HMIC, December 2015. Available from: www.justiceinspectorates.gov.uk/hmicfrs/publications/real-lives-real-crimes-a-study-of-digital-crime-and-policing/

³ This inspection was carried out before 19 July 2017, when HMIC also took on responsibility for fire & rescue service inspections and was renamed HM Inspectorate of Constabulary and Fire & Rescue Services. The methodology underpinning our inspection findings is unaffected by this change. References to HMICFRS in this report may relate to an event that happened before 19 July 2017 when HMICFRS was HMIC. Citations of documents which HMIC published before 19 July 2017 will still cite HMIC as the publisher.

⁴ Simon Byrne is the chief constable of Cheshire Constabulary.

⁵ A report on phase one of the NPCC Specialist Capabilities programme can be found at www.npcc.police.uk/documents/Specialist%20Capabilities%20Programme%20Phase%20One%20Report.pdf

Because of the concerns expressed to us and to inform our understanding of operational police collaboration involving all territorial forces in England and Wales, we decided to undertake a study. This report sets out our findings as a result of that study.

The terms of reference for this study were:

“To develop HMIC’s understanding of police air support and, in particular, to establish:

- to what extent current arrangements for police air support contribute to the effectiveness and efficiency of individual police forces;
- how well current arrangements for police air support allow the police service to adapt to changes in demand and technology; and
- how police air support might be further developed to better meet the needs of the police service and other public sector organisations.”

To provide further context, a brief history of police air support is included in Appendix B.

Methodology

Between January and March 2017, we collected information in the following ways:

- We visited 18 police forces to interview chief officers and other senior staff. We also held structured meetings to hear the views of frontline officers and police staff.⁶
- We asked all 43 forces in England and Wales to complete a questionnaire about their use of drones.
- We met with specialist users regarding air support to serious organised crime and counter-terrorism operations.
- We visited NPAS headquarters in Wakefield and seven NPAS bases to interview senior managers and to ask pilots, flight crew and other NPAS staff for their views.
- We met with each member of the NPAS National Strategic Board.

⁶ Some of these visits involved officers from more than one force; in total we collected information through interviews and structured meetings from 32 forces.

- We met with officials from the Home Office and the Civil Aviation Authority (CAA) and with representatives from other operational agencies, such as the fire and rescue services, Border Force and Immigration Enforcement.
- We analysed documentation and performance and financial data provided to us by NPAS, police forces and the Home Office.

Performance

Judgment

- The level of service provided to many forces is lower than we expected to find, and many incidents are over before an aircraft can reach the scene.

Findings

Performance across England and Wales

In 2008, ACPO⁷ began a review of the police air support strategy which had been agreed in 1993. That review found widely differing performance management systems in place across the 31 police air support units then in existence and proposed the introduction of a national performance framework.

The resulting report⁸ recommended that calls for service should be graded according to the urgency of response they required. This led to inclusion within the collaboration agreement⁹ for NPAS of a service level agreement,¹⁰ which gives the following definitions for different levels of priority:

- Priority 1: Incident requires the immediate response of a National Police Air Service asset the failure of which could result in a serious impact on the outcome of the incident. Examples include incidents which pose an immediate threat to life, incidents of terrorism or of national importance and incidents where the effectiveness of the police response is likely to have a significant impact on the confidence of the victim, their family and/or the community.

⁷ The Association of Chief Police Officers, which was dissolved in 2015 on the creation of the National Police Chiefs' Council.

⁸ *Police air operations: A review of the national strategy*, 2009, ACPO, unpublished.

⁹ Version 2.0 of the collaboration agreement may be found at www.npcc.police.uk/documents/StandardNPASCollaborationAgreement%20May%202013.pdf The current version, issued in August 2013 and numbered 3.0, is not available at present on either the NPAS or NPCC websites, but a copy of the agreement (excluding the schedules) may be found at www.westmidlands-pcc.gov.uk/media/365709/npas-collaboration-agreement-aug-2012-for-publication.pdf

¹⁰ The service level agreement may be found in appendix B to schedule 1 of the collaboration agreement. All references within this report to schedules or clauses within the collaboration agreement are based on version 2.0, as this was the version supplied to us by NPAS.

- Priority 2: Incident requires a response of a National Police Air Service asset but not deemed immediate however requiring the asset on scene normally within 60 minutes or otherwise as agreed with the Operational Commander, the failure of which could result in a serious impact on the outcome of the incident. Examples include incidents where a deployment will lead to immediate prevention/detection of crime.
- Priority 3: Incident, potential incident or other task requires the non-immediate response of a National Police Air Service asset however the response time will be agreed between the National Police Air Service and the customer to co-ordinate the most appropriate level of service. Examples include pre-planned tasks such as evidence gathering and aerial imagery.¹¹

We discussed the application of these definitions with NPAS senior management, who told us that they used a different set of definitions that were contained elsewhere within the collaboration agreement.¹² Under these similar but distinct definitions, only incidents involving an immediate risk to life were allocated to priority 1. When an immediate response was required to a crime such as a burglary, it would normally be allocated to priority 2.

Performance information supplied to us by NPAS shows that in 2016 there were 28,881 operational actioned calls for service. Of these, 14 percent (3,978) had been allocated to priority 1 and 70 percent (20,252) to priority 2. There must therefore have been 4,651 operational calls (16 percent) allocated to priority 3. In other words, the vast majority (86 percent) of calls for service made to NPAS in 2016 did not involve an immediate risk to life, although most calls did require an immediate response.

This is significant because the collaboration agreement requires different levels of service for different levels of priority. The target for priority 1 calls is for the time from lift-off to arrival on scene to be less than 20 minutes for at least 85 percent of all

¹¹ Note that these priority levels are different from the deployment model categories used to prioritise different types of call for service. Each call for service will be allocated a priority level to guide the timeliness of the NPAS response, and a deployment model category to indicate the relative importance of that call for service with respect to other calls.

¹² These definitions are contained within the user requirement, which also forms part of schedule 1 to the collaboration agreement. Within this second categorisation of priority, the definitions were: priority 1 – incidents which include an immediate threat to life, terrorist action, a national incident, etc.; priority 2 – incidents which require a deployment which will lead to the immediate prevention or detection of a crime; priority 3 – pre-planned tasking.

calls. For priority 2 requests, the target is for the time from receipt of the request to arrival on scene to be less than 60 minutes for at least 90 percent of all calls.¹³

These targets have been achieved. In 2016, NPAS attended 98 percent of priority 1 calls within the 20-minute lift-off to arrival target time, and 92 percent of priority 2 calls within the 60-minute receipt to arrival target time.¹⁴ Many frontline officers made it clear to us during our fieldwork, however, that a response time of up to one hour when dealing with a crime in action such as a burglary is far too long, and that the targets contained within the service level agreement are not fit for purpose.

It is important to understand that these figures only reflect calls where an aircraft actually arrived at the scene of an incident. If the requesting force cancelled the call for air support before an aircraft arrived, there would be no arrival on scene and so no response time to measure. The proportion of calls cancelled varied significantly between forces but, overall, of the 57,562 calls that led to despatch of an aircraft in 2016, forces cancelled the aircraft on 24,873 occasions (43 percent of occasions on which an aircraft was despatched).¹⁵

This means that in 2016, when a force requested air support, 86 percent of the time an aircraft was available and was despatched, but in a little under half of those cases the force cancelled the request before the aircraft arrived. In other words, the overall number of aircraft appears to be adequate to cater for all but the highest peaks of demand, but that number is spread too thinly across England and Wales to provide timely responses about half of the time that NPAS support is requested.

The NPAS strategic assessment¹⁶ produced in June 2016 identified that the performance measures originally set for NPAS were 'time bound' and described an intention to produce a balanced scorecard, an initial version of which has been included with monthly reports sent to forces by NPAS since June 2016.

¹³ This does not mean that NPAS despatchers will delay deployment of an aircraft or that an aircraft will not travel to the incident as quickly as possible, just that the actual time to arrival will be used for calculation of priority 2 performance.

¹⁴ These percentages are based on 66,472 action calls for service from 41 territorial forces in England and Wales, excluding Humberside Police (which only joined NPAS in September 2016) and the City of London Police (for which only two actioned calls for service were recorded).

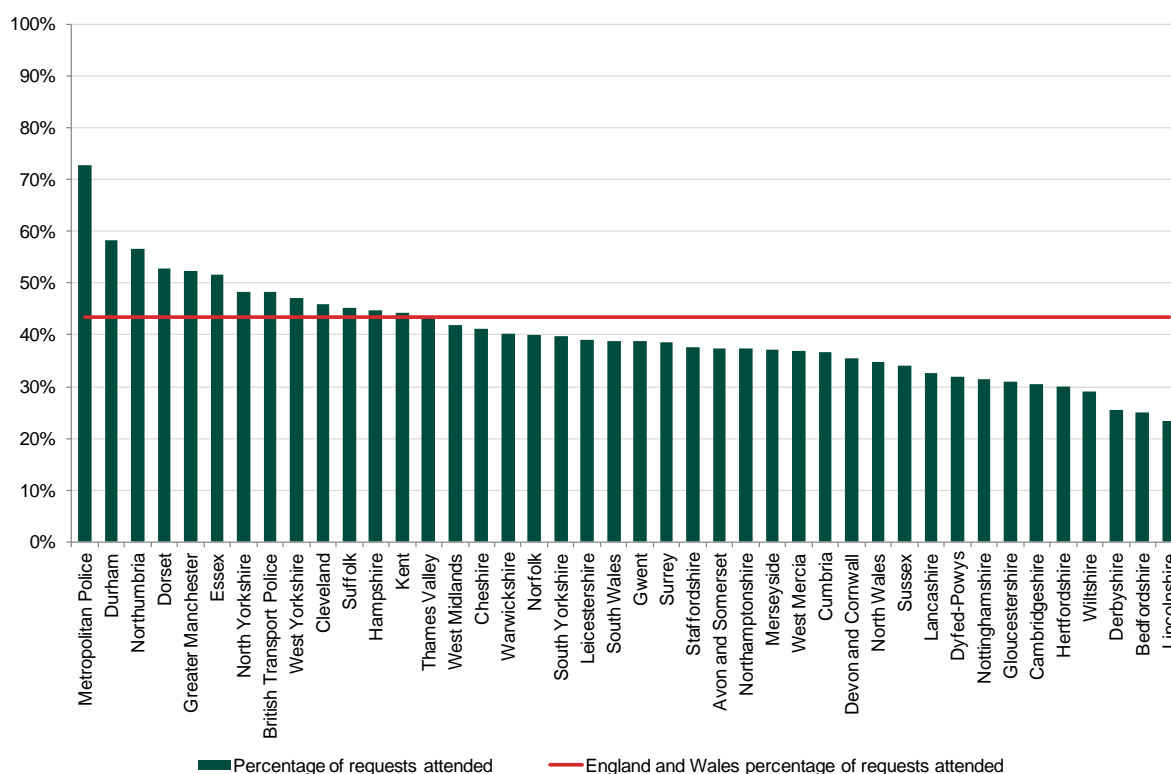
¹⁵ These calculations also exclude calls relating to Humberside Police, the City of London Police and British Transport Police.

¹⁶ A strategic assessment gives an overview of the current and long-term issues affecting or likely to affect a force or other law enforcement organisation. See: www.app.college.police.uk/app-content/intelligence-management/intelligence-products/

Performance at force level

Where a force calls for air support, the two most important factors from the point of view of the requesting officer are whether an aircraft actually attends and, if so, how long it takes to arrive. We therefore looked at the proportion of calls for service to NPAS by each force that actually resulted in attendance of an aircraft.

Figure 1: Proportion of calls in 2016 with aircraft attendance (excluding City of London Police and Humberside Police)¹⁷



Source: Data provided to HMICFRS by NPAS in January 2017

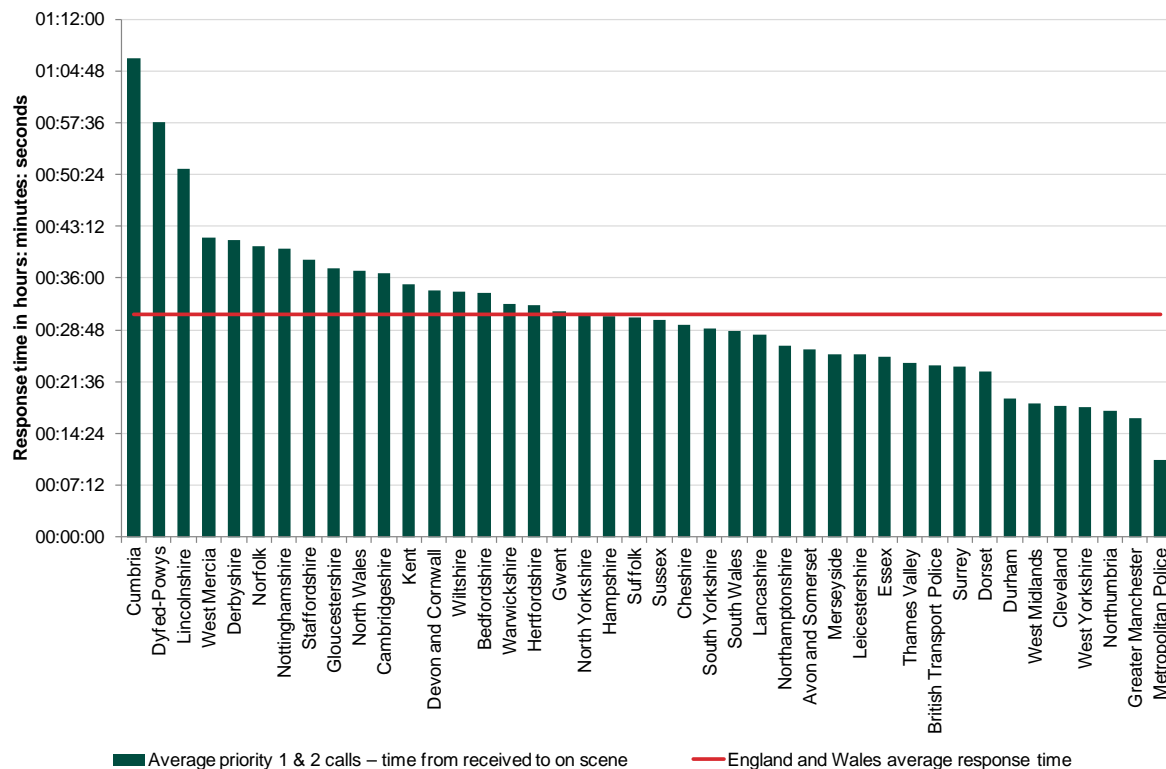
As can be seen from Figure 1, attendance rates varied considerably, with over 73 percent of calls from the Metropolitan Police Service resulting in attendance of an aircraft, but only 23 percent of calls from Lincolnshire Police. Only six forces had an aircraft respond to calls for service more than half of the time, while ten forces had an aircraft respond to fewer than one-third of their calls.

We also looked at the average response time in 2016, looking at the time from receipt of call until the aircraft arrived on scene (see Figure 2). Again, we found considerable variation.

¹⁷ The City of London Police has been excluded because the force only made two calls for service in 2016, both of which were actioned. Humberside Police has been excluded because the force only joined NPAS in September 2016, meaning data for a whole year are not available.

The Metropolitan Police Service received the quickest responses, with an average time (for priority 1 and 2 calls) of just over ten-and-a-half minutes. In contrast, the corresponding figure for Cumbria Constabulary was over 1 hour and 6 minutes, while Dyfed-Powys Police and Lincolnshire Police both had average response times in excess of 50 minutes. Only seven forces had an average response time of less than 20 minutes, with 15 forces having an average response time of greater than 30 minutes.

Figure 2: Average response times in 2016 (excluding City of London Police and Humberside Police)



Source: Data provided to HMICFRS by NPAS in January 2017

During our fieldwork, officers from several forces expressed particular concern about the lack of timely response to police pursuits. Professional practice requires air support for pursuits whenever possible and at the earliest opportunity,¹⁸ but officers in some forces told us that most pursuits ended before an aircraft could arrive. Some officers said that the delay was sometimes caused by NPAS questioning the necessity for air support in pursuit cases, and this made the work of pursuit and incident commanders more challenging, because they had to manage the pursuit without knowing if air support was a realistic tactical option.

¹⁸ For further detail on Authorised Professional Practice about police pursuits, see: www.app.college.police.uk/app-content/road-policing-2/police-pursuits/#air-support

In one force, officers reported that the number of pursuits had risen from 100 in 2014 to 336 in 2016, and that debriefing of prisoners had revealed that part of the reason was criminal perception that the police no longer had ready access to helicopter support. Some NPAS flight crew also believed that there were increasing numbers of police pursuits in some force areas, and that reductions in the size of the NPAS fleet had reduced their ability to support forces in managing pursuits.

When air support is not available, this sometimes means that the force incident commander will decide that a pursuit should be discontinued, which may lead to offenders escaping. On other occasions, the pursuit commander will deploy tactics other than air support, and some officers told us that some of these tactics are less effective if they cannot be conducted in conjunction with air support.

Conclusions and recommendations

Performance across England and Wales

The different definitions for each priority level and the introduction of a new deployment model¹⁹ have made it harder to assess performance than it should be. We believe that there needs to be a clearer distinction between operational prioritisation based on risk, and the categories used in management information for recording types of deployment and levels of performance achieved.

More importantly, we found that the performance targets contained within the service level agreement added little, if any, value. We understand the targets were set to provide NPAS with a baseline expectation from forces, but NPAS appeared to have concentrated on achievement of the targets, rather than developing its understanding of performance more broadly. We were surprised to learn that NPAS had recognised that the targets contained within the service level agreement did not meet force requirements some years previously, when an intention had been expressed to refer more challenging targets to the National Strategic Board.²⁰

¹⁹ This model categorises accepted calls for service into three categories: those related to the Strategic Policing Requirement; those about crimes in action; and those about local priorities. The Strategic Policing Requirement is issued by the Home Secretary to set out which policing threats require a national response and what capabilities are necessary at force level to counter those threats. Chief constables and policing bodies are under a statutory duty to have regard to the Strategic Policing Requirement when carrying out their duties.

²⁰ NPAS Annual Report 2013/14, NPAS, page 9. Available from: www.npas.police.uk/about-us/npas-annual-reports

Performance at force level

For a national service, we start from the basis that wide variation in performance at force level can only be justified if there are different levels of risk or types of operational need in different forces. From the data made available to us, we cannot be satisfied that this is the case. We recognise that geography and other factors may lead to differing levels of air support to different forces, but if that is the case we would expect this to be an outcome explicitly foreseen by those responsible for overseeing NPAS performance. We did not find that to be the case.

When NPAS publishes its monthly performance reports, it does not produce one for each of the six regions used by NPAS, but combines data for the London and southeast regions in one report. Combined figures are then carried across into reports for the other regions, with the data being reported as concerning the south east region (even though it is actually for the south east and London regions together). This is unhelpful. The volume of demand from the Metropolitan Police Service, along with the high attendance rate and quick average response the force receives, produce a misleading picture of performance for forces in the south east region, and we see no obvious reason for this practice to continue.

We make the following recommendation:

Recommendation

1. As soon as practicable, the National Strategic Board should reinvigorate the development of NPAS performance reporting, including the balanced scorecard, to better demonstrate the contribution made by NPAS to force effectiveness and efficiency. NPAS should publish its performance information at national and force levels and include regional levels only when this adds clear value.

Finances

Judgments

- There is no clear evidence that current arrangements are financially any more or less efficient than when forces managed their own air support, and costs are not shared equitably between forces.
- NPAS in its current form is financially unsustainable: the capital investment strategy has left NPAS without adequate funding to replace its ageing fleet of aircraft.

Findings

Financial contributions from forces

In 2010, when chief officers agreed to create NPAS, their decision was based on estimates of the charges that would fall to each force. Every force was expected to make a saving; these ranged from a reduction in revenue cost of 74 percent for Dyfed-Powys Police to one of 6 percent for Lincolnshire Police. The reduction to be made in total (revenue and capital) expenditure was estimated as 22 percent (£14.9m).²¹

When NPAS began operation in 2012, the revenue contributions due from each force were set out in schedules to the collaboration agreement, and in some cases the force contributions were significantly different from the amounts estimated in 2010.²² These schedules showed the annual payment due from each force and the flying hours the force could use in return.²³ If the allocation of flying hours was exceeded, a further charge would be made, but there would be no refund if the allocated hours were not used.²⁴

²¹ Information taken from papers presented to the ACPO Chief Constables' Council meeting of 15 October 2010. The reduction of 22 percent represented a mix of anticipated efficiency improvements and some reduction in capacity.

²² For example, the annual contribution estimated in 2010 for Dyfed-Powys Police was £357,781, whereas the amount charged for its first year of NPAS service was £891,000.

²³ For its contribution of £891,000, Dyfed-Powys Police would receive 349 flying hours of air support, representing a cost per flying hour of £2,553.

²⁴ See clause 13 of the collaboration agreement.

By December 2013, NPAS had calculated that it could not provide the expected levels of service for the amounts it had agreed with forces, and it was forecasting that its revenue costs in 2013/14 would exceed force contributions by £3.9m.²⁵ The National Strategic Board therefore agreed to develop a new approach to calculating force contributions.

We were told that the National Strategic Board considered 63 different models for calculating force contributions. The model adopted was that of charging according to the number of actioned calls for service, because it was believed that this method was the most fair and because consultation with forces had shown it to be the preferred option.²⁶ The new model was implemented from January 2016, and force contributions are now calculated in proportion to the number of actioned calls for service made by each force in the previous calendar year.

For the 2017/18 business year, charges under this model provide NPAS with a revenue budget of £38.3m.²⁷ A figure of 29,175 actioned calls for service in 2016 was used for the calculations, which gives a charge of £1,314 for each actioned call for service.²⁸ This means the contributions required of forces in 2017/18 range from £7.2m for the Metropolitan Police Service (based on 5,456 actioned calls for service) to £2,628 for the City of London Police (based on two actioned calls for service).²⁹

A significant proportion of the officers we interviewed who were designated as single points of contact with NPAS expressed concern about current charging arrangements, and it appeared to us that the actioned calls for service charging model might have some weaknesses; for example, no allowance is made for the differences between forces in response times or attendance rates. We therefore explored whether this had an impact in terms of the perceived value for money

²⁵ Minutes of the meeting of the NPAS National Strategic Board meeting of 10 December 2013, paragraph 4.3, available on the NPAS website.

²⁶ Only 13 forces had formally expressed a preference for this model, but it was seen as the most favoured of several options presented to forces in early 2015. For further information, see item 10 of the minutes of the National Strategic Board meeting of 2 July 2015.

²⁷ NPAS may receive additional revenue from other sources, such as the supply of air support to other organisations and from leasing one of its helicopters to police in Oslo, Norway.

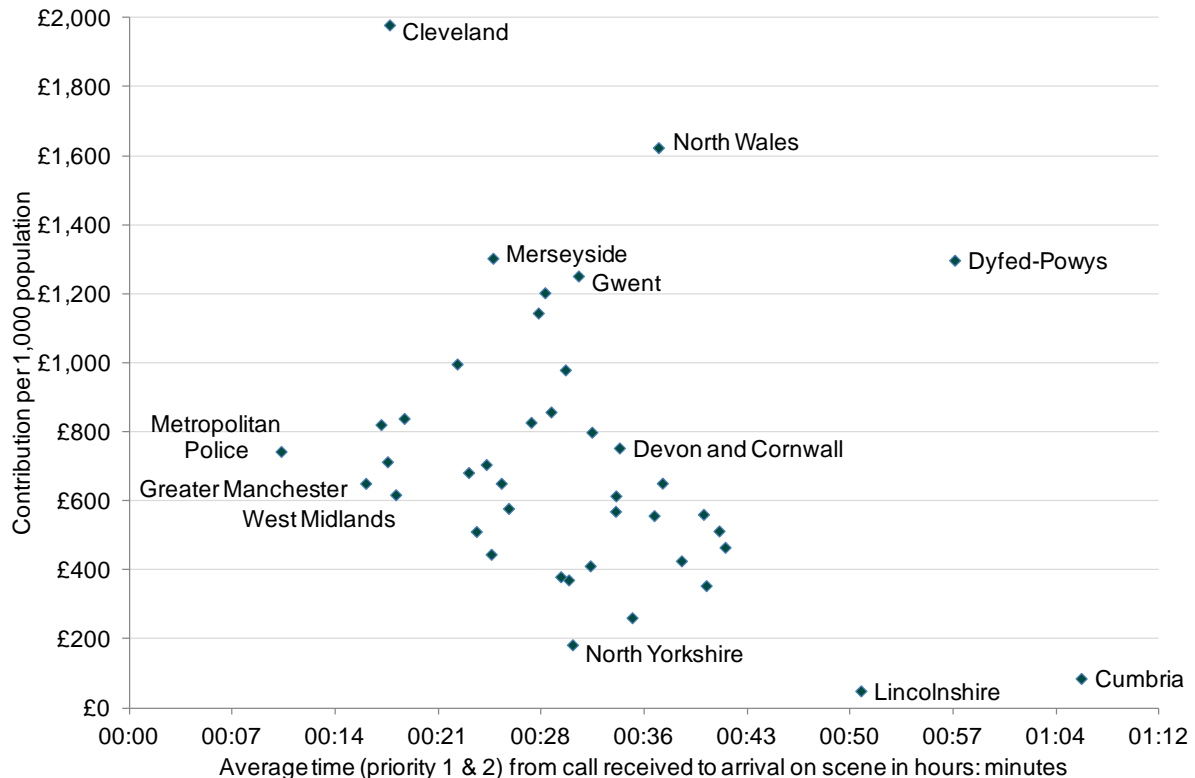
²⁸ Although NPAS recorded a total of 29,051 actioned calls for service in 2016, a figure of 29,175 was used for calculating force contributions, as this latter figure included an estimate of a full year of actioned calls for service to Humberside Police, which only joined NPAS in September 2016.

²⁹ British Transport Police joined the NPAS collaboration in January 2015 even though it is not required to source air support from NPAS, and as such its contribution is calculated in the same way as those for Home Office forces. This is in contrast to the supply of air support by NPAS to Defra (the Department for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs), which is managed through a Memorandum of Understanding that sets out how charges will be calculated.

obtained by a force in return for its contribution to NPAS. Additionally, forces pay for NPAS services from their annual revenue budgets, and so we wanted to examine how affordable NPAS was for different forces.

We began by comparing average response times with force contributions adjusted to account for population, to allow comparison between forces of different sizes and because the sums made available to a local policing body to police a force area are at least partly dependent on population.³⁰

Figure 3: Cost in 2016 per head of population compared with average response time



Source: Data provided to HMICFRS by NPAS in January and February 2017, ONS 2015 mid-year population estimates

High charges per head of population for Dyfed-Powys Police and North Wales Police were not matched by quick response times. In the case of North Wales Police, the high cost might have been explained by the fact that the force is an above-average user of air support, but the opposite was the case for Dyfed-Powys Police.³¹ And in 2016, Gwent Police used NPAS almost as much as North Wales Police, yet paid less per head of population and received a better service.

³⁰ Funding for forces is provided through central government grants and monies raised in each force area through the council tax. Further detail is available at www.gov.uk/guidance/guide-to-the-police-allocation-formula and on the websites of individual local policing bodies.

³¹ See Figure 2.

In comparison with other forces, Cleveland Police was an average user of air support and benefited from a quick average response time, but the force paid far more per head of population than several forces with similar levels of use and similar or quicker response times.

Of the remaining forces, the Metropolitan Police Service stood out as receiving the quickest responses from NPAS while only paying a broadly average amount per head of population. In comparison, Merseyside Police paid about 75 percent more per head of population than the Metropolitan Police Service yet had response times about two-and-a-half times slower, while Devon and Cornwall Police paid about the same as the Metropolitan Police Service per head of population but with response times more than three times slower. North Yorkshire Police and Gwent Police experienced response times similar to Devon and Cornwall Police, yet North Yorkshire Police paid only a quarter as much as Devon and Cornwall Police, while Gwent Police paid more than 60 percent more.

When we examined further, we established that the high amounts paid by some forces were partly due to these having significantly fewer actioned calls for service in 2016 than in 2015 (a reduction of 30 percent for North Wales Police, 46 percent for Cleveland Police and 50 percent for Dyfed-Powys Police); effectively, they were paying in 2016 for the higher number of calls made in 2015. We were unable to determine the extent to which those reductions were a result of changes in underlying demand, better tasking at force level, a less responsive service from NPAS, or a desire by those forces to reduce future contributions to NPAS.

We did, however, establish that the high amounts paid by these forces were also partly due to the way that force contributions for the financial year 2016/17 had been calculated. A dampening factor had been included to reduce the degree of change when compared with NPAS charges in 2015/16.³²

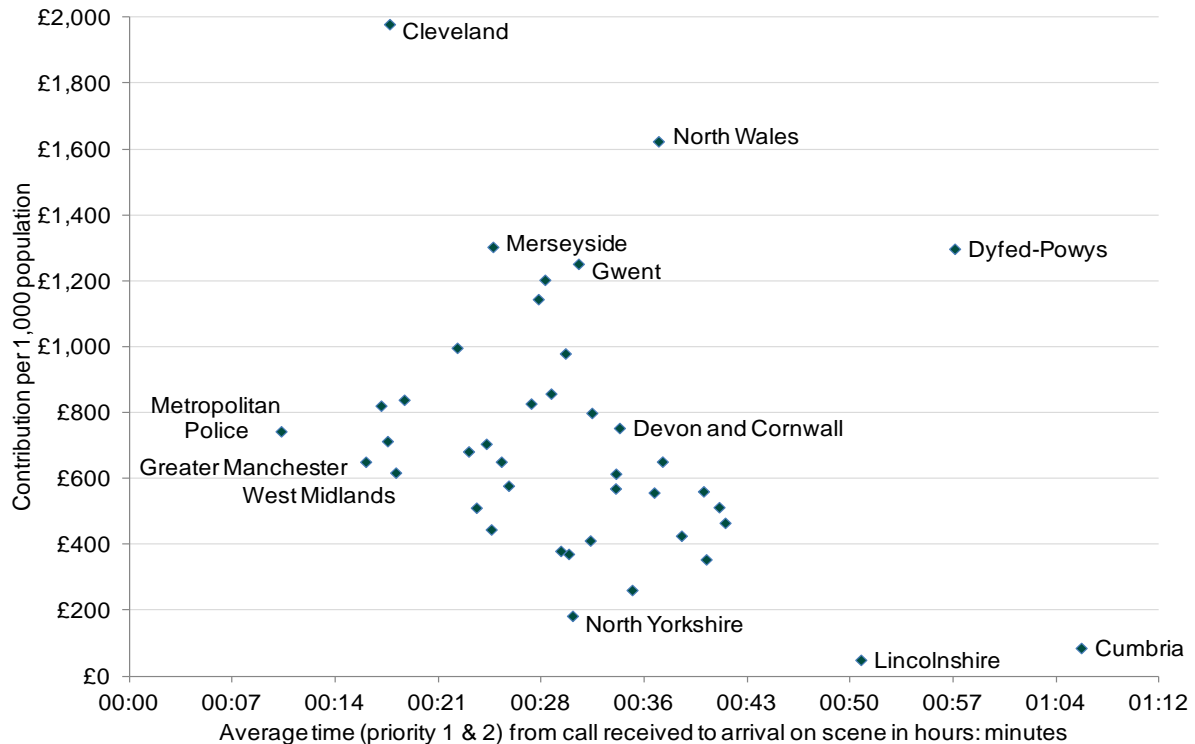
This had the effect that some forces paid far less in 2016/17 than would otherwise have been the case (including Lincolnshire Police paying 63 percent less than would otherwise have been due, West Yorkshire Police paying 55 percent less, and Surrey Police paying 42 percent less), while other forces paid considerably more (including Dyfed-Powys Police paying more than double what would otherwise have been due, Wiltshire Police paying an extra 71 percent and Gwent Police paying an extra 60 percent). This dampening has been withdrawn from the 2017/18 financial year and will result in these outlying forces coming into line with other forces, subject to any significant change in use of NPAS services from year to year.³³

³² It also reflected the fact that charges for the first quarter of 2016 – the last quarter of the financial year 2015/16 – had been calculated using the previous ‘flying hours’ model.

³³ Contributions to NPAS from some forces in 2017/18 are considerably lower than in 2016/17: 80 percent lower in the case of Dyfed-Powys Police, 60 percent lower for Cleveland Police and over 40 percent lower for North Wales Police.

We then compared attendance rates in 2016 for each force with the cost of NPAS services, again adjusted for population (see Figure 4). This analysis also shows some outlying forces as a result of the dampening applied in 2016/17.³⁴

Figure 4: Cost in 2016 per head of population compared with proportion of calls for assistance attended



Source: Data provided to HMICFRS by NPAS in January and February 2017 and ONS 2015 mid-year population estimates

Looking at forces for which charges had not been subject of the greatest adjustment through dampening, however, it was evident that paying more per head of population was not associated with a greater proportion of calls for service resulting in aircraft attendance. Most forces have an attendance rate between 30 percent and 50 percent, yet the amount paid per 1,000 population varied from £85 (for Cumbria Constabulary, with an attendance rate of 37 percent) to £1,302 (for Merseyside Police, also with a 37 percent attendance rate). The Metropolitan Police Service again stood out, with the highest of all attendance rates yet only an average financial contribution.

It was interesting that other metropolitan forces such as West Midlands Police and Greater Manchester Police, which paid a similar amount per head of population and which also had helicopters based within the force area, had much lower attendance rates. We suspect this was because the aircraft normally operated from Birmingham and Manchester but were now covering such wide geographical areas that they

³⁴ The same analysis for 2017/18 would be likely to see Cleveland Police and North Wales Police falling much lower down the chart, while the increased charge to Lincolnshire Police would see that force move a little higher.

could not offer the same level of service to their 'local' forces as the four aircraft that normally operated in London and the south east were able to offer the Metropolitan Police Service.

Having examined the extent to which NPAS charges were related to response times and attendance rates, we then explored how affordable NPAS services were for each force. We had already seen that NPAS charges per head of population varied considerably, from as little as 5p per person per year for Lincolnshire Police to as much as £1.98 per person per year for Cleveland Police.³⁵ But the amount of money available to a force each year per head of population also varies. For example, Merseyside Police and Sussex Police have reasonably similar populations in their force areas, yet the 2016/17 budget for Merseyside Police (£321.6m) is considerably larger than that for Sussex Police (£265.3m).³⁶

We were conscious that, as a national collaboration, NPAS needs to deliver services to forces with widely differing levels of demand. However, it also needs to be affordable for all its member forces. We therefore examined the relationship between forces' annual net revenue expenditure and their contributions to NPAS.³⁷

In 2017/18, NPAS has a revenue budget of £38.3m. Police revenue funding for the same year for forces in England and Wales is £10,992m. This means that, overall, police forces are currently contributing about 0.35 percent of their revenue funding to air support. However, forces are not contributing to similar degrees.

As can be seen from Figure 5, in 2016/17, force contributions as a proportion of their net revenue expenditure varied significantly. Lincolnshire Police, for example, spent 0.04 percent of its annual expenditure on NPAS services, while for Dyfed-Powys Police the proportion was over 20 times higher, at 0.85 percent.³⁸

As described earlier, the removal of dampening from 2017/18 onwards will significantly reduce the proportions paid by Dyfed-Powys Police and Gwent Police.

³⁵ As outlined above, Cleveland Police paid considerably more in 2016 than it will in the financial year 2017/18; most forces paid between £0.30 and £1.00 per head of population for support from NPAS in 2016.

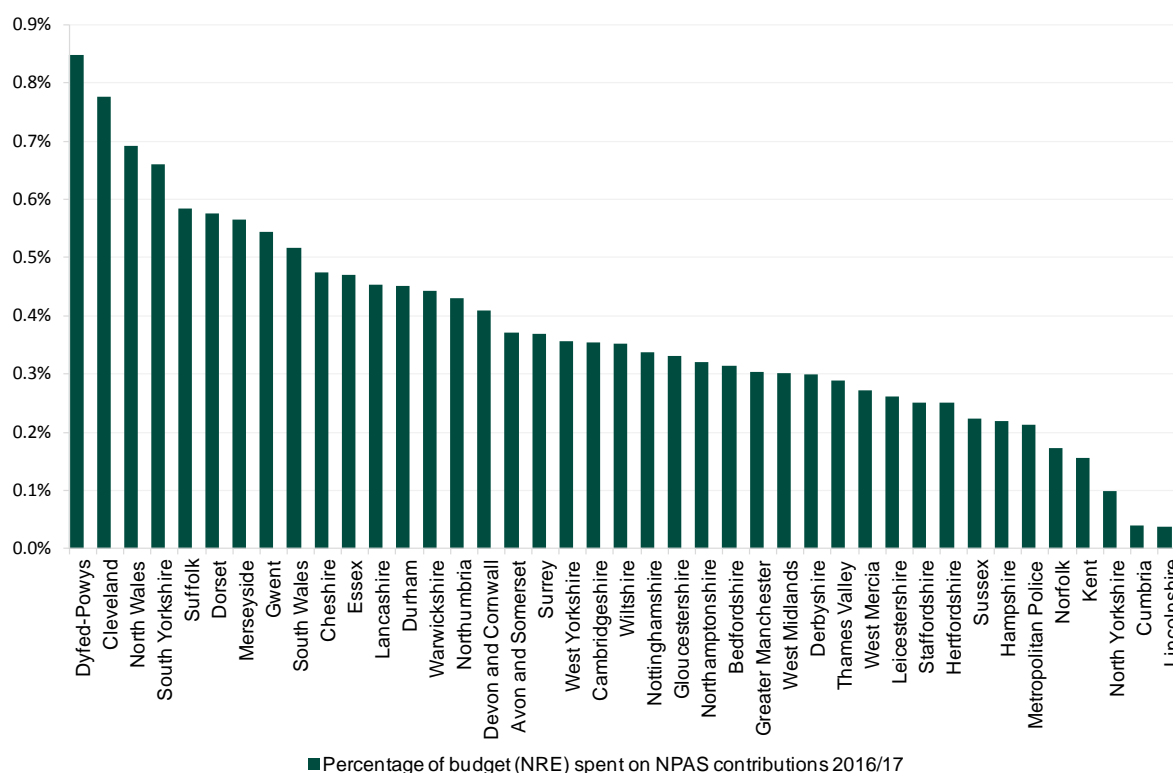
³⁶ Territorial forces in England and Wales are funded partly through Home Office and Welsh Government funding, and partly through council tax precepts set by local policing bodies.

³⁷ We used for this purpose the net revenue expenditure (NRE) figures included within our 2016 Value for Money profiles for forces, which are available at: www.justiceinspectorates.gov.uk/hmicfrs/our-work/value-for-money-inspections/value-for-money-profiles/#2016

³⁸ By way of comparison, in 1993 Devon and Cornwall Police was spending 0.58 percent of its annual budget of about £86m to operate its air support unit – see *Air support units in the police: Do they provide value for money?*, Brian Kingshott, September 1993, obtained from the National Police Library.

Reductions in NPAS use will also reduce the proportions paid by Cleveland Police and North Wales Police, and further reduce the amount paid by Dyfed-Powys Police.

Figure 5: Proportion of 2016/17 Net Revenue Expenditure (NRE) spent on NPAS by force



Source: Data provided to HMICFRS by NPAS in February 2017 and Police Objective Analysis estimates 2016/17

It was, nevertheless, interesting to compare other forces. Norfolk Constabulary and Suffolk Constabulary, for example, might be considered as having similar policing environments, yet the amount paid per head of population by Suffolk Constabulary was more than three times that paid by Norfolk Constabulary. South Yorkshire Police and Kent Police cover areas with mixed urban and rural communities and similar population sizes, yet South Yorkshire Police’s contribution was more than four times that of Kent Police.

We looked in particular at the position with the Metropolitan Police Service. A schedule to the collaboration agreement sets out that the Metropolitan Police Service would initially make a revenue contribution to NPAS of £7.2m a year, but that amount would fall by three percent each year to reach £6.4m by 2019/20.³⁹ These

³⁹ These amounts were subject to adjustment to take account of increases in NPAS salaries and currency fluctuations, etc. In any event, the introduction of the calculation of force contributions based on actioned calls for service has meant that the sums documented in the collaboration agreement are no longer applicable.

amounts included not only the charges relating to support for general policing duties but also charges for support to national counter-terrorism operations and the additional costs of policing the capital.⁴⁰

In 2016/17, the Metropolitan Police Service revenue contribution to NPAS was £6.2m.⁴¹ This represented 0.2 percent of the force's annual revenue budget and so was much lower than the average contribution across England and Wales of 0.35 percent. In 2017/18, the force's contribution will increase to £7.2m, but as a proportion of the force revenue budget, this is still likely to be a smaller proportion than for most other forces.⁴²

During our meetings with NPAS managers, concerns were expressed to us about an unintended consequence of basing the charging model on the number of actioned calls for service. It was suggested that some forces were now requesting air support more frequently than they had before, monitoring an aircraft's travel, and then cancelling the aircraft shortly before it arrived if they were satisfied that the incident could be managed without it. This meant that there was no 'actioned call for service' and so no charge would fall to the force, even though NPAS had incurred the cost of flying the aircraft and potentially turned down a simultaneous request for support, albeit one of lower priority, from another force.

Of course, it would be preferable for a force to call for air support at an early stage, rather than delay a request and risk leaving too little time for an aircraft to arrive. However, we would expect such decisions to be based on assessment of risk rather than 'gaming of the system', and we acknowledge that if this were to occur more frequently, NPAS charges to a force could increase even if that force's use of NPAS remained static.⁴³

⁴⁰ The Metropolitan Police Service's initial annual contribution of £7.2m was intended to cover the cost of 2,700 flying hours, made up as follows: counter-terrorism operations 390 hours (14 percent); policing the capital 360 hours (13 percent); and 'business as usual' 1,950 hours (72 percent).

⁴¹ For support to general policing, counter-terrorism operations and policing of the capital.

⁴² The budget for the Metropolitan Police Service includes funding for policing tasks that do not apply to the same degree in most other forces (for example, the duties associated with royalty and diplomatic protection).

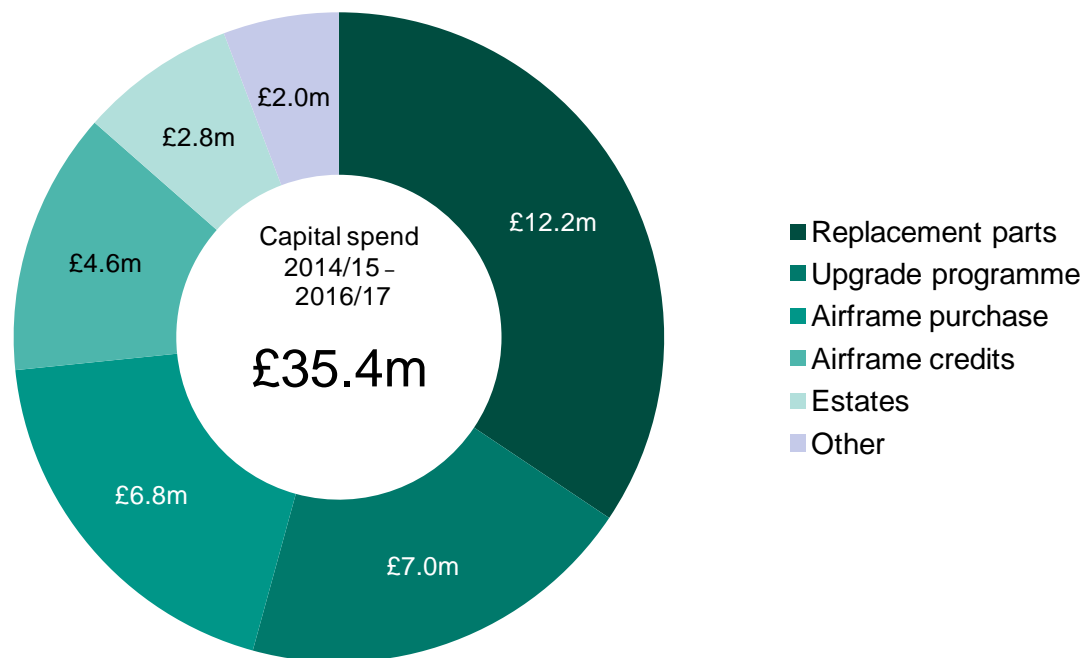
⁴³ Because the lead local policing body has to recover the full operating cost of NPAS, and where costs incurred cannot be associated with an actioned call for service, those costs have to be apportioned between all 44 collaborating forces.

Financial management by NPAS

In addition to revenue funding from forces, NPAS also receives an annual capital grant from the Home Office. In some years, NPAS may also receive capital income from other sources.⁴⁴ Under the current practice by which NPAS owns most of its aircraft,⁴⁵ the capital allocations determine how many aircraft and bases NPAS can purchase and equip, which in turn has a significant effect on the level of service NPAS can provide to forces.

NPAS provided us with details of its capital expenditure over the last three years, showing spends of £8.7m in 2014/15, £9.7m in 2015/16 and £17.0m in 2016/17. The Home Office allocations in these years had been £8.7m, £9.1m and £16.5m respectively, with an allocation of £12.2m having been approved for 2017/18.

Figure 6: NPAS capital spending over three years (2014/15 to 2016/17)



Source: NPAS data provided to HMICFRS in February 2017

⁴⁴ In 2016/17, for example, it received £950,000 from the sale of two helicopters that had been taken out of service, and additional capital sums carried forward from 2015/16 and paid by British Transport Police.

⁴⁵ NPAS owns all its aircraft with the exception of one helicopter that is leased.

When we looked further at how these allocations had been spent, we found that between 2014/15 and 2016/17 the total of £35.4m had been spent as indicated in Figure 6. The £2m shown as ‘other’ spend included £954,000 on staff costs and training,⁴⁶ £591,000 on information technology and other equipment, and £290,000 on a trial that had informed the decision to purchase four fixed-wing aircraft.

The £4.6m spent on ‘airframe credits’ relates to the way that NPAS was created.⁴⁷ Before NPAS, police aircraft were owned by local policing bodies. The collaboration agreement that set up NPAS required all local policing bodies that owned aircraft to transfer them to the local policing body for West Yorkshire. To compensate them for the value of those aircraft, it was agreed that the forces would receive an annual capital payment until the end of the aircraft’s 15th year of service, with each annual payment being one-fifteenth of the amount the force had paid for the aircraft (excluding the amount contributed by the Home Office). After 15 years of service, any proceeds from the sale of an aircraft would accrue to the local policing body for West Yorkshire and be accounted for as a capital credit on behalf of NPAS (rather than West Yorkshire Police).

We were initially surprised to see such a significant proportion of the capital budget had been spent on aircraft parts; we had expected that such costs would normally have fallen to the revenue budget. NPAS managers told us, however, that procurement of certain more expensive items, such as helicopter rotor blades costing £250,000 each, had to be treated as capital expenditure.

When we met with NPAS management, they told us that the way that capital was distributed – through annual grants from the Home Office⁴⁸ – raised some difficulties. For example, if NPAS needed to purchase three aircraft over two years, grants might be sufficient to purchase only one aircraft in each year, and there was no ability to transfer unspent allocations from one year to the next or to hold a capital reserve. Furthermore, there was a very clear relationship between capital investment in NPAS and the revenue budget necessary to operate the assets obtained through capital spend. NPAS managers told us that, while the National Strategic Board set

⁴⁶ This is despite the fact that the business case for the purchase of the fixed-wing aircraft states that the staff costs associated with their purchase would be treated as one-off revenue, rather than capital costs.

⁴⁷ Of the £12.2m of capital allocated for 2017/18, £2.7m will be required for airframe credits, leaving £9.5m for the purchase of new aircraft and other capital items.

⁴⁸ Home Office police capital grants for 2017/18 total £77.2m, of which £12.2m has been allocated to NPAS. See: www.parliament.uk/business/publications/written-questions-answers-statements/written-statement/Commons/2016-12-15/HCWS360/

the annual revenue budget, it was the Home Office that determined the capital grant, and the National Strategic Board could not plan on the basis of assured future capital allocations.⁴⁹

It was unclear to us why NPAS managers believed the local policing body could not carry over unspent capital grant from one year to the next, as local policing bodies do hold capital reserves; furthermore, the lead local policing body is expressly permitted to hold capital and revenue reserves for NPAS purposes.⁵⁰ Additionally, the Home Office had agreed to carry over unspent capital allocation for NPAS from 2014/15 to 2015/16 to facilitate the purchase of the fixed-wing aircraft, and so it seemed there was not an absolute bar on capital transfer from one year to the next.

Conclusions and recommendations

Financial contributions by forces

We considered the extent to which the collaboration's costs were shared equitably between forces and the extent to which NPAS was affordable for each force.

We found no correlation between the amounts contributed to NPAS by forces per head of population and the level of service they received in terms of response times or attendance rates.⁵¹ On the one hand, the method chosen for calculating force contributions was not intended to take account of these factors, and so that may not be surprising. However, if a force had not been mandated to participate in this collaboration but had chosen, for example, to obtain air support from a commercial provider, we would expect the contract for that service to have included some relationship between the quality of service received and the amount paid.

We judge from this, using the words of one National Strategic Board member, that current arrangements have indeed created 'winners and losers'. It appears to us that three factors in particular have contributed to this situation and now largely determine whether a force wins or loses: the significant reduction in the number of operating bases and aircraft; the proximity of a force area to an NPAS base; and the method used for calculating contributions according to actioned calls for service.

⁴⁹ Although the Home Office told us that the National Strategic Board determines the NPAS capital plan, and the Home Office then awards a grant that is based upon that plan.

⁵⁰ By clause 1.1.13 of schedule 8 to the collaboration agreement.

⁵¹ For example, Lancashire Police paid £0.83 per head of population in 2016/17, with 33 percent of its calls for service resulting in aircraft attendance; Cumbria Constabulary paid £0.09 per head of population, with a 37 percent attendance rate. Merseyside Police paid £1.30 per head of population in 2016/17 and experienced an average response time of 26 minutes; Greater Manchester Police paid £0.65 per head of population and had an average response time of 17 minutes.

Put simply, the reductions in the size of the aircraft fleet and the number of bases have meant that the costs of the service are being borne, to an increasing degree, by those forces that happen to have a base nearby, as in many cases only those forces can obtain a response that is sufficiently speedy to be of use. Furthermore, the efficiency savings that forces sought to make through borderless tasking are no longer realistically available. Such savings would only be achieved if a closer aircraft was despatched rather than a more distant one, but with a much smaller fleet and most incidents requiring an immediate response, there is now no real choice available about which aircraft will be despatched.

In our view, this is neither equitable for a national service nor likely to promote the most effective and efficient use of air support.

We recognise that NPAS has plans to increase capacity through the addition of four fixed-wing aircraft, and also that adding further aircraft, whether helicopters or fixed-wing, would require increased contributions from forces for which not all chief officers and local policing bodies may be in favour. In any event, as outlined elsewhere in this report, police leaders cannot be expected to make informed decisions on the optimum size and composition of the aircraft fleet without agreement on strategic direction and much better information about demand.

While that work continues, however, and acknowledging that the National Strategic Board invested considerable time and energy in developing it, we do not believe the current financial model represents the best way of sharing NPAS costs between forces. Its introduction has also made planning by NPAS more difficult; when forces had to commit to a number of flying hours, NPAS could plan its capacity based on explicit requirements, but now it can only estimate demand.⁵² As the charging model is an important component of the collaboration agreement, we shall return to this matter in the final section of this report.

We also suspect that as a result of forces' perception of the unfairness of the current model, some forces may be seeking to reduce their use of NPAS even though this may not be operationally appropriate.⁵³ We would be concerned if operational decisions were driven by a desire to meet financial targets rather than assessment of

⁵² When NPAS was created, forces needed to specify a number of flying hours to be provided, and effectively to commit to that specification (because no refund was available if the hours were not used). Current arrangements do not require any forecasting by forces, or any commitment other than the commitment that all forces share to reimburse the lead local policing body for NPAS revenue costs.

⁵³ The two forces making the highest contributions per head of population in 2016, Cleveland Police and North Wales Police, had both reduced their use of NPAS services significantly since 2015 (reductions of 47 percent and 30 percent respectively in actioned calls for service). At that point, neither force had invested in drones as an alternative form of air support.

risk and consideration of the most appropriate tactic available. Furthermore, decisions on the use of air support need to take account of the financial as well as the operational implications of not using it.⁵⁴

We note the particular circumstances of the Metropolitan Police Service. Because of the high level of demand across a relatively small geographical area, the Metropolitan Police Service may not have needed to invest as high a proportion of force revenue in air support as other forces before NPAS was created.⁵⁵ The collaboration was agreed by chief officers with the explicit intention that all forces would benefit from the greater efficiency achieved through national operation, and we believe that for the duration of the current collaboration agreement, this intention should be respected. This means that the NPAS objective of achieving a lower-cost service than one managed locally must be applied to each force individually and not just collectively.⁵⁶

We therefore consider it appropriate for the contributions paid by the Metropolitan Police Service, and potentially some other urban forces, to be lower as a proportion of force revenue budgets than those paid by smaller and rural forces. It is important that any further changes to the arrangements for calculating force contributions to NPAS do not increase the charges to large urban forces in order to subsidise the cost of providing timely air support in less densely populated areas.

When we discussed the funding model with NPAS management, they expressed the view that a more appropriate arrangement for providing NPAS with revenue funding would be 'top-slicing'. This would mean that revenue grants to all forces would be slightly reduced, in proportion to the size of each force's annual allocation. One argument for this view was that other organisations that provide services to all forces in England and Wales, such as the National Crime Agency and the College of Policing, receive their principal revenue funding directly from central government.⁵⁷ Furthermore, NPAS capital funding is currently provided on a 'top-sliced' basis.

⁵⁴ In 1988, the Home Office published the results of a study that had concluded that searching open land was almost 40 times cheaper using a helicopter than using officers on foot. The Home Office refreshed that research in 2008 and found that searching by air was still about 20 times faster than searching on foot (but did not calculate the relative costs on this occasion).

⁵⁵ Account also needs to be taken of the additional funding received by the Metropolitan Police Service for tasks unrelated to general policing, when comparing its contribution to NPAS with those of other forces.

⁵⁶ We acknowledge, however, that it will become increasingly difficult to compare force contributions to NPAS against the likely cost of an equivalent, locally operated service, given that the only UK police forces operating air support units outside NPAS are those in Scotland and Northern Ireland. Alternative comparisons of cost and value achieved may well be feasible, however.

⁵⁷ Although the National Crime Agency is not funded from the Police Grant, and police forces also receive funding raised through the council tax.

Although we would not discount this option completely, we are not attracted to it. There appears now to be a degree of consensus that the current charging model is flawed, but no consensus on what a better model might be. NPAS is an organisation that provides support to the routine operations of police forces rather than one that needs to operate independently of forces, and we believe it is necessary that the costs of NPAS are routinely considered alongside the costs borne by forces in undertaking the tasks that lead to requests for air support, such as searching for missing persons or pursuing fleeing suspects.⁵⁸ With the British model of local policing and local accountability, we also believe that there needs to be a clear case for any move from local to national funding arrangements, and we do not see that here. For these reasons, we do not believe that 'top-slicing' revenue funding is necessarily the best option, and more work is needed to clarify the principles that should underlie the funding model for NPAS and to identify the relative merits of different options.

Financial management by NPAS

In terms of capital spend, we were surprised that no new helicopters had been ordered in the first few years since the creation of NPAS; the newest helicopter was purchased in 2011 and the oldest ones in 1999. Like-for-like replacement under the current model of a 15-year operational life for aircraft would have meant that four new helicopters were needed by 2017 and another three by 2019.⁵⁹ As annual capital spend of £12.5m was sufficient to maintain a fleet of 33 aircraft before NPAS, a capital budget of about £11m per year might be thought sufficient to maintain a fleet of 23 aircraft (assuming they were aircraft of a similar type and allowing for the fact that 20 percent of the capital budget over the last three years was returned to police forces as airframe credits).

We looked into this further and found that of the £56.1m of capital allocated to NPAS by the Home Office between 2012/13 and 2016/17, as much as 26 percent (£14.4m) had in fact been used for airframe credits. Some £6.8m had been spent on new aircraft, meaning £34.9m had been spent over this period on capital items other than airframe credits and new aircraft. Our analysis of capital expenditure for 2014/15 to 2016/17 showed that most of the £34.9m has been spent on replacement parts and aircraft upgrades, with significant sums also having been spent on estates and other items.

We looked at why so much of the capital budget had been spent on replacement parts. The 2009 ACPO strategy review stated that the annual cost of maintenance for the 33 aircraft in the 2008/09 fleet was £10.8m. The content about capital

⁵⁸ For example, a force could also search for missing persons using volunteers, officers on foot and police dog handlers, and also consider the use of drones.

⁵⁹ We were told that procurement of a new aircraft might take up to three years, meaning the procurement process for delivery in 2017 would have needed to start by 2014.

expenditure did not refer to spare parts or maintenance at all, which suggests that this figure included both replacement parts and engineering and labour costs.

The sum of £10.8m represents average expenditure of about £327,000 per aircraft per year, for parts and labour. At that time, most if not all police aircraft were less than ten years old. Some NPAS aircraft are now older, however, and the cost of maintaining older aircraft can be significantly higher.

If the £12.2m spent on replacement parts by NPAS between 2014/15 and 2016/17 was spent to maintain 26 aircraft,⁶⁰ that would mean an average annual spend per aircraft of about £156,000 (of capital funding for replacement parts and excluding associated labour costs). This figure appears proportionate to the amount for parts and labour represented by the £10.8m spend in 2008/09.

From this, we conclude that under current maintenance arrangements, a fleet of 19 helicopters, where some may be more than ten years old, could well require average capital expenditure of £3m to £4m per year on replacement parts. Airframe credits averaged a little over £1.5m annually between 2014/15 and 2016/17, although in 2017/18 they are due to be £2.7m; this reflects the fact that payment of airframe credits can be readily moved between financial years, provided that in the end the total amount due is paid.

Average capital costs of maintenance and airframe credits for the current fleet therefore appear to be in the region of £4.5m to £5.5m annually. With capital allocations having averaged £11m per year, there would appear at first sight to have been sufficient capital remaining to invest in fleet replacement.

The remaining capital amounts have been spent in three main ways: on aircraft upgrades; on the new, fixed-wing aircraft; and on estates. The largest part has been spent on upgrades, which have, in effect, been used as an alternative to purchasing new helicopters. Whether the increased maintenance costs likely to arise with older aircraft are offset by the extra five years of working life expected is something we cannot readily determine. NPAS managers told us that maintenance costs increase significantly with aircraft age, such that, for each hour flown, the number of hours of maintenance required can be up to four times higher than with a newer aircraft. The estimates made in 2009 and 2010 do not appear to have taken these additional costs into account, but it was beyond the scope of this study to explore this further.⁶¹

⁶⁰ The fleet size actually decreased from 26 aircraft over this period; we use this figure for illustrative purposes.

⁶¹ As an upgrade will remove an aircraft from operational duties for around nine months, a decision to operate a fleet on a 15-year working life basis also means that more aircraft are required, to maintain daily operational capacity. NPAS did not increase its fleet accordingly and so has incurred no additional cost here, but this is something that would need to be allowed for when future fleet plans are made.

The investment in aircraft upgrades averaged about £2.3m a year between 2014/15 and 2016/17, resulting in a total average capital requirement of up to £7.8m per year.⁶²

NPAS will incur costs on estates for two main reasons: maintaining existing bases, and purchasing and equipping new ones. Consideration will be given to use of both capital and revenue funding in each case, but the particular circumstances of each base will determine the necessary funding choice. New bases might be required when aircraft need to be relocated either because existing bases cease to be available, for example because the airfield concerned is sold for redevelopment, or to provide a better balance of service across England and Wales.

Once the costs of estates and other capital items are considered, it appears that the average capital allocations to NPAS have been insufficient to fund the replacement of the seven oldest helicopters that are due to be taken out of service by 2019. Effectively, the capital available was only sufficient to extend their working lives by five years, and continuing with this level of capital allocation is likely to permit the working lives of further helicopters to be extended, but not the replacement of those that have reached the end of their working life.

When we discussed this with Home Office officials, they informed us that NPAS bids for capital had always been approved in full. The National Strategic Board told us that they are currently preparing a bid for a fleet replacement programme, which they plan to submit to the Home Office by March 2018.

We considered the comments made by NPAS management about the way that the organisation is provided with capital. Operating with public ownership of police aircraft requires close correlation between capital and revenue investment in NPAS, and this requires the active participation of Home Office officials in NPAS decision making.⁶³ It appeared to us that there may have been some misunderstanding about the transfer of unused capital funding from one year to the next. In any event, although the Home Office has always met NPAS capital bids in full, it would be unwise to assume this would always be the case. If National Strategic Board members were of the opinion that planning on the basis of annual capital grants risked the long-term stability of NPAS, then it would be appropriate to consider procuring a greater proportion of the fleet through revenue rather than capital

⁶² Excluding maintenance charges associated with the fixed-wing aircraft, once they come into operation.

⁶³ The last meeting of the National Strategic Board in which the Home Office participated was in June 2016. The Minister of State for Policing and the Fire Service subsequently informed the board that Home Office officials would no longer routinely attend board meetings, although the Home Office would continue to support the leadership of NPAS.

funding, even if lowering the risk of instability led to increased costs.⁶⁴ We believe that is properly a matter for consideration by local policing bodies and not something that requires direction from central government.

Having considered NPAS use of capital, we turned our attention to expenditure more widely. As a whole, the police service invests less in air support now than it did before NPAS.⁶⁵ Given that one of the key objectives for NPAS is to achieve a lower-cost service than one procured and managed locally, we wanted to explore whether reductions in service levels were proportionately smaller than the reductions in the amounts invested, because this would indicate that an increase in financial efficiency had been achieved.

In 2009, the estimated annual cost of a national fleet of 26 aircraft was £10.7m in capital and £34.7m in revenue. These figures are not dissimilar to the actual costs incurred by NPAS in recent years, but when inflation is allowed for, they represent reductions in real terms.⁶⁶ However, NPAS aircraft are not flying as much as police aircraft did in the past. As the number of flying hours has fallen more sharply than total capital and revenue payments, the cost per flying hour has increased significantly. The 2009 review estimated a cost per flying hour of £1,335, but in 2016/17 the NPAS cost per flying hour was £2,820.⁶⁷

NPAS managers told us that the estimates made in 2009 may not have been based on the full costs of operating a national police air service. Like any organisation, NPAS needs corporate services such as human resources support, IT services and media liaison, yet the costs of such services may not have been adequately

⁶⁴ There is some evidence that NPAS could increase its revenue expenditure without increasing force contributions, because at the end of 2015/16 it had accumulated a revenue surplus of £3.5m. The National Strategic Board decided in June 2017 to use £1m of that sum to cover a revenue over-spend in 2016/17, leaving a surplus of £2.5m. We were told that decisions about the use of that surplus will be taken once the full costs associated with the closure of bases in 2015/16 have been calculated.

⁶⁵ Annual capital and revenue payments have fallen by 20 percent since 2010, from £63.5m to £50.5m (in 2017/18).

⁶⁶ We were unable to examine the effects of inflation within the aviation sector, but as a guide, retail price inflation between 2008 and 2016 had a cumulative effect of about 22 percent. See: www.bankofengland.co.uk/education/Pages/resources/inflationtools/calculator/default.aspx#

⁶⁷ In 2016/17, 17,800 hours were flown at an overall cost of £50.2m, excluding the £9.9m capital cost related to the purchase of fixed-wing aircraft and the building of the base for them at Doncaster. If those costs were included, the cost per flying hour would be £3,376. By way of comparison, in 2014/15, 18,529 hours were flown by NPAS aircraft at a cost of £44.7m, giving a cost per flying hour of £2,416; the non-NPAS aircraft flew 5,747 hours in the same year for a cost of £13.3m, giving a slightly lower cost per flying hour of £2,314. In 2015/16, 19,166 hours were flown by NPAS aircraft at a cost of £49m, giving an hourly cost of £2,556.

considered in 2009 and 2010.⁶⁸ This means that the 2009 estimated cost per flying hour may not have been a realistic figure, although we do not believe that it would have been significantly inaccurate simply for this reason.

The arithmetical reason for the scale of the increase in cost per flying hour was that the 45 percent reduction in the number of flying hours was not matched by proportionate decreases in cost. We had expected that the reduction in flying hours and the smaller fleet would have reduced maintenance and fuel costs as well as certain fixed costs, such as those associated with maintaining bases.⁶⁹ We therefore examined whether other factors may have increased NPAS costs above previous and estimated levels.

Firstly, as outlined earlier, about a quarter of the capital made available has been paid to police forces as compensation for the aircraft transferred into NPAS. Pre-NPAS, there was no equivalent to the payment of airframe credits; all capital investment contributed directly to the provision of aircraft that, once in service, would be flown in support of police operations. Now, however, about a quarter of capital investment is transferred by NPAS to police forces, which either use that capital to fund projects unrelated to air support or add it to capital reserves. Part of the increased cost per flying hour is therefore likely to be due to the payments for airframe credits. It should be noted, however, that the cost of airframe credits was included in the 2010 estimates presented to chief constables.⁷⁰

At some point before 2012, a decision was taken that NPAS bases would operate on a 24-hour, 7-day-a-week basis.⁷¹ Previously, most force air support units had operated with more restricted operating hours. Based on what we learned about the demand from forces for air support, we are satisfied that this was a reasonable decision. Although this would not have led to any increased capital costs, it would have meant that NPAS would have required more pilots and tactical flight officers, which would have increased NPAS revenue costs. The 2009 and 2010 ACPO

⁶⁸ The 2009 review estimated 'finance/personnel' and 'operating' costs of £0.5m a year, although it is unclear how that figure was calculated. The 2010 paper to chief constables does not refer explicitly to the cost of corporate services.

⁶⁹ The number of bases has also been reduced, from 20 in the proposal agreed by ACPO in 2010 to 15 now.

⁷⁰ As indicated by the section headed 'Whole Life Costs & Savings' in Appendix C to the 2010 paper.

⁷¹ The Explanatory Memorandum to the 2012 Order refers explicitly, at paragraph 7.5, to the fact that NPAS will operate on a 24/7 basis.

estimates were not explicit on proposed operating hours, but it is reasonable to assume that the extension of operating hours has also increased the cost per flying hour.⁷²

One point raised with us by NPAS managers was that costs may have increased because of changes in the management infrastructure for police air support. Before NPAS, each police air support unit was led by a unit executive officer⁷³ who was responsible for managing air support operations on behalf of the Police Air Operator's Certificate holder (normally a chief constable). The CAA instead requires NPAS to have an Accountable Manager and a number of subordinate management roles. It appeared to us, however, that even if these roles were paid at higher rates than the former unit executive officers,⁷⁴ the overall cost would be unlikely to exceed that of the 31 unit executive officers formally in post.

Some officers expressed the view that maintenance arrangements were now less efficient than they had been before NPAS.⁷⁵ Given that maintenance is now wholly provided by a commercial organisation,⁷⁶ and that only one firm bid for the contract and so there was limited commercial competition, it is possible that the arrangements NPAS has in place for maintenance are less efficient than those that existed beforehand.

Although it was beyond the scope of this study to examine this issue in detail, we have considered the information readily available to us. Annual revenue costs for maintenance, which we understand include the labour charges for planned and unplanned maintenance and for aircraft upgrades as well as the supply of parts that are not treated as capital items, was £11.1m in 2014/15 and £12.7m in 2015/16. If those revenue charges are apportioned according to the capital spend,⁷⁷ this means an approximate revenue spend on planned and unplanned maintenance of about

⁷² As we did not have details of staffing in the pre-NPAS air support units, we were unable to calculate by how much the cost has increased.

⁷³ The unit executive officer model is still used in smaller police air support units, like that of the Police Service of Northern Ireland.

⁷⁴ Who were generally police officers at sergeant or inspector rank.

⁷⁵ NPAS Annual Reports show that (revenue) maintenance charges were £11.1m in 2014/15 and £12.7m in 2015/16. These figures are likely to include both pre-planned and unplanned maintenance and the costs associated with aircraft upgrades, but not the cost of parts that are treated as capital items.

⁷⁶ Under previous arrangements, a limited amount of maintenance was undertaken by in-house engineering teams, which according to one assessment reported in the 2009 ACPO strategy review could be a third cheaper than obtaining maintenance through a commercial organisation.

⁷⁷ The capital cost of aircraft upgrades over the same period was £7m, compared with £12.2m spent on replacement parts.

£7.6m a year, or £290,000 for each of 26 aircraft. That gives a total annual maintenance cost (capital and revenue) of about £446,000 per aircraft, which when allowing for inflation and the older NPAS fleet is broadly proportionate to the amounts being spent in 2008/09. We therefore do not believe that there has been any significant real-terms increase in maintenance costs.

We were conscious that both the targets contained within the service level agreement and the performance information in regular NPAS reporting were largely based on the 'outputs' of the service, such as response times and attendance rates. If efficiency is to be assessed, then account also needs to be taken of the outcomes enabled by the use of air support. NPAS managers told us that it had been difficult to develop outcome-based performance measures. By way of example, they explained that if an aircraft was deployed for two hours to search for a missing person but did not find them, some might regard that as a lack of success. But if the person had not been present in the area searched, then the mission could never have been 'successful', and the area had at least been searched more efficiently than would have been the case if officers on foot had been used.

We acknowledge the challenges in the development of outcome measures, which we see as stemming from a lack of common understanding across the police service of the contribution that air support can make, a point we address later in this report.⁷⁸

Taking into account:

- the amounts estimated for running a national service, which were based on actual running costs in the years before NPAS;
- suggestions that those estimates may not have taken full account of certain costs, such as those associated with human resources and other support functions;
- our uncertainty about whether the decision to upgrade aircraft and extend their working life has been financially efficient in the longer term;
- the information we have about expenditure by NPAS and the limited information we have about air support costs in 2014/15, when some aircraft were operated by NPAS and some by force air support units;⁷⁹
- the fact that, other than in connection with the procurement of four fixed-wing aircraft to replace three helicopters, the costs of NPAS to date have not included any amounts for ongoing fleet replacement;

⁷⁸ In the section on operational management.

⁷⁹ The cost then per flying hour for police air support units was a little cheaper than that for NPAS. We are cautious, however, in drawing too strong a conclusion from this simple calculation, as we have not compared the differences between NPAS and force air support units in detail.

- the information we have about the service provided by NPAS, including the facts of 24/7 operation but also of the significant reduction in total flying hours;
- a complete lack of data about air support outputs and outcomes in the years before NPAS;
- the estimates we have made for the effects of inflation; and
- the challenges we have described of assessing outcomes;

we can only conclude that there is no clear evidence that current arrangements are either any more or less efficient financially than when forces managed their own air support.

We stress that we do not believe this means that NPAS has failed, or that a return to previous arrangements is called for. Nor are we suggesting that any particular decisions made have been wrong; operating a smaller fleet, for example, could well offer a less efficient financial return on investment when compared with operation of a larger aircraft fleet, yet still represent the correct decision for the circumstances.

In a mandated collaboration, however, we do believe that partners to the collaboration should be able to form a judgment on matters of financial efficiency. We believe this, and the explicit key objective for NPAS to deliver a lower cost service than one operated locally, places a duty on the lead local policing body to demonstrate clearly and consistently how the collaboration is more efficient than other alternatives, including the arrangements in place beforehand.⁸⁰

We also note that, in accordance with the terms of the collaboration agreement, it is the responsibility of the National Strategic Board to hold the lead local policing body to account for delivery of the service. This, we believe, demonstrates the importance of the board being chaired by a person other than the lead local policing body, given that the chair naturally influences the agenda for board meetings and the material provided for consideration by board members.

We believe that a lack of clarity about the extent to which providing air support nationally rather than at force level was meant to provide the police service with improved effectiveness, increased financial efficiency, reductions in the amounts spent on air support, or some combination of these is best remedied by changes to the collaboration agreement.

⁸⁰ Clause 9 of the collaboration agreement sets out a number of duties for the lead local policing body, including duties to proactively manage the service to ensure continued improvement, to prepare and reconcile accounts, and to use reasonable endeavours to deliver value for money and cost efficiency.

We shall return to that matter in the final section of this report. However, given the concerns described later in this report about the governance of police air support and the need for urgent decisions on the future financing of NPAS, we make one recommendation.

Recommendation

2. Before submitting its proposed costed fleet replacement plan to the Home Office, the National Strategic Board should ensure that all forces and local policing bodies are adequately consulted on the plan's operational and financial implications.

Strategic leadership

Judgments

- There is no up-to-date police air support strategy, and there is scope for improvement in policy, guidance and communication on air support.
- Current NPAS governance arrangements are unsatisfactory: the mechanisms for collaborative decision making are inadequate, and having the PCC who is jointly responsible for providing NPAS services as chair of the main decision-making group inhibits accountability.

Findings

NPAS status and objectives

NPAS was created through a collaboration agreement made under the Police Act 1996. NPAS does not have a distinct legal identity: the PCC for West Yorkshire owns (or leases) NPAS physical assets such as its aircraft, while the chief constable of West Yorkshire Police is responsible for the management of NPAS staff.⁸¹

The collaboration agreement states that the

“key objectives of NPAS are:

- to maximise the benefits of air support to the delivery of frontline police services;
- to achieve a lower cost service than a service which is procured and managed on a local basis;
- to form an integrated part of the wider policing strategy, supporting its objectives; and
- to harness innovation in the aviation sector for the benefits of policing.”⁸²

⁸¹ The current office holders are Mr Mark Burns-Williamson OBE and Ms Dee Collins QPM respectively.

⁸² Clause 3.2 of the collaboration agreement.

The Home Secretary's Order that led to the creation of NPAS requires forces that wish to use air support to obtain it through a single collaboration agreement, rather than a series of agreements between a service provider and individual forces.⁸³ We learned that the level of service to be provided to each force and the financial contributions required in return were documented in schedules to the collaboration agreement, with the content of these having been negotiated directly between NPAS and the collaborating forces.⁸⁴ We further learned that this had led to important differences between the arrangements applying to different forces.⁸⁵ For example, the Metropolitan Police Service had negotiated reductions in revenue contributions that increased by 3 percent year on year until 2019/20; most other collaborating forces would not have been aware of these arrangements.⁸⁶

As a result of Humberside Police joining NPAS in September 2016, the collaboration agreement fell due for an initial review no later than September 2017.⁸⁷ Forces were consulted on the review both through discussion at National Strategic Board meetings and directly through letters sent to all chief constables and local policing bodies.⁸⁸ We understand that the initial review did not lead to the collaboration agreement being updated by September 2017, although work is progressing to issue a revised collaboration agreement by early 2018.

The creation of NPAS required careful design of governance arrangements, with three separate governance bodies foreseen: the Strategic Board, the Management Board and the Independent Assurance Group (IAG).⁸⁹ We collected information about each of these to assess compliance with the collaboration agreement and the extent to which collaborating bodies were satisfied with them.

⁸³ The Police (Collaboration: Specified Function) Order 2012. Available from: www.legislation.gov.uk/ukxi/2012/1690/contents/made The accompanying Explanatory Memorandum provides details of the policy background behind the making of the Order.

⁸⁴ Schedules 1A and 1B to the collaboration agreement.

⁸⁵ Clause 2.6 of the collaboration agreement states that schedules (and appendices to any schedule) to the agreement shall form part of the agreement and have the same force and effect as if expressly set out in the body of the agreement itself.

⁸⁶ Although since the introduction of force contributions based on actioned calls for service, the contributions due from all forces have been calculated using an identical method.

⁸⁷ See clause 5 of the collaboration agreement.

⁸⁸ Details of the review were not made available to us during our fieldwork, although some information was subsequently shared in June 2017.

⁸⁹ The collaboration agreement describes the first of these bodies as the Strategic Board, but it has met under the title of the National Strategic Board since June 2014.

The National Strategic Board

The National Strategic Board is responsible for setting the strategic direction of NPAS.⁹⁰ On behalf of chief constables, PCCs and the local policing bodies in London,⁹¹ the board also:

- oversees arrangements for accountability and performance management;⁹²
- holds the PCC for West Yorkshire to account “for the delivery of the service in accordance with the agreed operational model;”⁹³ and
- holds the chief constable of West Yorkshire Police to account “for the delivery of the Service (a critical national policing function) to other Police Bodies.”⁹⁴

The National Strategic Board has 14 voting members:⁹⁵

- one representative from a local policing body in each of the six regions into which England and Wales have been divided for air support purposes;⁹⁶
- one chief officer (or their representative) from each of those six regions;
- the chief constable of West Yorkshire Police (as the lead local chief constable); and
- the PCC for West Yorkshire (as the lead local policing body).

Each of the above members of the board holds one vote, with decisions to be taken by way of simple majority and with the chair holding a casting vote. The chair of the board should be one of the local policing body members.⁹⁷

In addition to the voting members, the following are members of the board without voting rights:

⁹⁰ Clause 10.1 of schedule 2 to the collaboration agreement, with tasks for the board being further defined in clause 10.2.

⁹¹ The Mayor’s Office for Policing and Crime has responsibility for the Metropolitan Police Service, and the Police Committee of the City of London Corporation oversees the City of London Police.

⁹² Clause 10.3 of schedule 2 to the collaboration agreement.

⁹³ Clause 1.2 of schedule 1 to the collaboration agreement.

⁹⁴ Clause 10.2.9 of schedule 2 to the collaboration agreement.

⁹⁵ Chief constables’ voting rights are limited by clause 10.19 of schedule 2 to the collaboration agreement; in particular, they cannot vote on termination of the collaboration agreement or on budgetary matters.

⁹⁶ For forces outside London, the local policing body is the PCC.

⁹⁷ Clause 10.6 of schedule 2 to the collaboration agreement.

- a representative of the Home Secretary;
- the NPCC lead for air support;
- the chair of the IAG or their representative (further information about this group is provided below); and
- other persons by mutual agreement of all parties.

We found a high degree of commitment among board members to making NPAS a success, but there were problems with the board's composition, compliance with the terms of the collaboration agreement and communication with service users.

Minutes of National Strategic Board meetings show that people other than board members regularly attended, including several members of NPAS staff,⁹⁸ the chief executive and solicitor of the West Yorkshire PCC, and the director of finance, the treasurer and the solicitor for West Yorkshire Police.⁹⁹ This meant that board meetings often involved 20 or more people, and on occasions up to half those present were closely connected with West Yorkshire Police or NPAS. We believe this weakens the distinction between the board as a collaborative decision-making body and NPAS as the service provider. We are not suggesting that individuals with relevant expertise should not provide the board with information and opinion relevant to decisions that need to be made, but their routine attendance at board meetings should be avoided unless the board as a whole deems it necessary to co-opt one or more individuals as a non-voting member.¹⁰⁰

Two of the five regions outside London were represented by chief constables and local policing bodies for the same force area. This practice, which is neither encouraged nor prohibited by the collaboration agreement, unnecessarily reduces the number of forces directly represented on the board; even if all 12 of the regional representatives were from different force areas, this would still mean that only about a quarter of forces would have a direct say in NPAS governance. In more diverse regions, it also reduces the range of perspectives that might be heard during board discussions. The north west region, for example, includes the very different environments of Merseyside and Cumbria, yet both the chief officer and local policing body representatives from this region were from Cumbria.

⁹⁸ Five NPAS staff were in regular attendance to assist with communication of information: the chief operating officer, the director of operations, the business development manager, the implementation manager and the marketing manager.

⁹⁹ Redacted versions of the minutes of meetings of the National Strategic Board are available on the NPAS website at www.npas.police.uk/about-us/national-strategic-board-minutes

¹⁰⁰ This might be reasonable, for example, in respect of the NPAS chief operating officer.

Furthermore, representation of a region by a chief constable and a PCC from the same force area arguably inhibits constructive debate, because it can be hard for a chief constable to speak or vote against the views expressed by the PCC who employs them.

British Transport Police, which we were told has joined the collaboration on basically the same terms as other police forces,¹⁰¹ was not adequately represented on the board. A senior officer from the force had attended four board meetings in 2014 and 2015 but without the same voting rights as other chief officers, and in any event the force had not participated in any meetings since July 2015.

The NPAS collaboration agreement specifies that the chair of the National Strategic Board must be a local policing body but also that the board is to be independent of the lead local policing body.¹⁰² In fact, since its inception the National Strategic Board has been chaired by the PCC for West Yorkshire. While the collaboration agreement does not explicitly preclude it, we do not believe that this arrangement provides the necessary degree of independence between the lead local policing body for NPAS and the National Strategic Board.¹⁰³ Should any disagreements arise between a force and the lead local policing body, the National Strategic Board acts as the arbiter, unless the problem is escalated to the Home Office.¹⁰⁴

Only a minority of the chief and senior officers we spoke to expressed satisfaction with the current NPAS governance arrangements. The main grounds for dissatisfaction were: a belief that the service provider was effectively holding itself to account; the limited number of forces represented on the National Strategic Board; the fact that chief officer members of the National Strategic Board could not vote on financial matters; and perceptions of limited consultation before decisions were made, with poor communication afterwards.¹⁰⁵ Concern was also expressed by the

¹⁰¹ Although separate capital funding has been transferred by the British Transport Police Authority to the PCC for West Yorkshire, as the allocation from the Home Office only provides for capital contributions on behalf of forces in England and Wales.

¹⁰² Paragraphs 10.6 and 10.8 of schedule 2 to the agreement. The lead local policing body is the PCC for West Yorkshire.

¹⁰³ Clause 1.2 of schedule 1 to the collaboration agreement states that the lead local policing body shall be held accountable by the NPAS Strategic Board for delivery of the service; it is difficult to see how the board can effectively discharge that responsibility with the lead local policing body as chair of the board.

¹⁰⁴ Arrangements for dispute resolution are set out in schedule 6 to the collaboration agreement.

¹⁰⁵ We heard, for example, that a request by a PCC for copies of the minutes of National Strategic Board meetings had been rejected by the chair of the board, meaning that the PCC only had access to the redacted versions available on the NPAS website.

Metropolitan Police Service that although London accounted for a substantial amount of NPAS activity, votes by the London region representatives carried no more weight than those of each of the other five regions.¹⁰⁶

Some, but not all, members of the National Strategic Board expressed a degree of sympathy with these reasons for dissatisfaction. Most described how they did their best to represent their peers, but some acknowledged that consultation could be difficult because of chief officers' and PCCs' other commitments and, occasionally, a perceived lack of interest in air support. One member expressed the view that arrangements were bound to create 'winners and losers'. We believe, in contrast, that for any collaboration to be successful, it must be conducted on a win/win basis. Otherwise, it ceases to be a collaboration and becomes a good deal for some forces at the expense of others.

Where structured arrangements existed for communication between forces and their representatives on the National Strategic Board, we found greater levels of satisfaction with the governance arrangements. Most forces reported that the frequency and quality of communication with NPAS had declined recently. NPAS explained to us that the National Strategic Board had approved a new communications strategy in September 2016. Two networks of single points of contact between NPAS and forces were in place, one at senior management level and one at a more operational level.¹⁰⁷

The Local Strategic Board

This body was not required by the collaboration agreement, but had been set up by the PCC for West Yorkshire to support him in discharging his duties. It was chaired by the PCC's chief executive and solicitor, with the chief constable of West Yorkshire Police and the NPAS Accountable Manager¹⁰⁸ being members, along with staff from West Yorkshire Police and the PCC's office.¹⁰⁹ We were told that the initial review of the collaboration agreement was likely to lead to this body being included within the governance structures required by the collaboration agreement.

¹⁰⁶ The Metropolitan Police Service accounted for almost 19 percent of NPAS actioned calls for service in 2016, making it the greatest single force user of NPAS services, although the NPAS southeast region accounted for over 22 percent of actioned calls for service in the same year.

¹⁰⁷ Most of our visits to forces included an interview with the senior management single point of contact, normally an officer of chief inspector or superintendent rank who was responsible for force operations.

¹⁰⁸ Appointing an Accountable Manager is a requirement of the Police Air Operator's Certificate, through which the CAA regulates NPAS; that role is undertaken by the NPAS chief operating officer.

¹⁰⁹ We were only provided with minutes for three Local Strategic Board meetings but noted from those that the PCC himself also attended these meetings.

The decision to create this body may have been a result of a lack of clarity within the collaboration agreement over the precise division of responsibilities between the lead local chief constable and the lead local policing body.¹¹⁰ We were aware that a recent study had found a lack of consensus on the appropriate division within specialist collaborations of responsibilities between chief constables and local policing bodies.¹¹¹ We understand that further attention is currently being given to this topic by the governance working group of the NPCC Specialist Capabilities Board.

The Management Board

The collaboration agreement also requires the creation of a Management Board¹¹² to be responsible for the day-to-day financial and operational management of NPAS, among other tasks.¹¹³ The collaboration agreement specifies that NPAS managers should be members of the board, and it should be chaired by the NPAS Accountable Manager.¹¹⁴

The Independent Assurance Group

NPAS governance structures also include a group that exists to represent operational users of air support and develop future requirements for consideration by the National Strategic Board.¹¹⁵ This group should consist of one assistant chief constable for each of the six NPAS regions, with one taking the role of chair on an annual rotational basis. The remaining member of the Independent Assurance Group (IAG) is the NPAS Accountable Manager.

¹¹⁰ Clause 9.8.1 of the collaboration agreement states that it is the duty of the local policing body to manage the delivery and operation of the service, and clause 1.2 of schedule 1 to the agreement states that the lead local policing body shall be held accountable by the NPAS Strategic Board for the delivery of the service, yet clause 14.2 of schedule 2 states that the chief constable is responsible for delivery of the service. While there may have been an intention to draw a distinction between 'managing delivery' of the service and the 'delivery' or 'operation' itself, it is unclear to us where the boundary between management and service provision lies, given that a chief constable is clearly a manager rather than a practitioner of air support. Furthermore, these clauses do not address the role of the Accountable Manager, who may also be held to account by the Strategic Board if NPAS services are not being provided to the required standard (in accordance with clause 5.6 of the agreement).

¹¹¹ *The governance of supra-force specialist policing capabilities; a review by the Police Foundation*, December 2016, Police Foundation. Available from: www.police-foundation.org.uk/projects/The-governance-of-supra-force-specialist-policing-capabilities

¹¹² Now known as the NPAS Senior Leadership Team.

¹¹³ As set out at section 11 of schedule 2 to the collaboration agreement.

¹¹⁴ Members of the board include the director of flight operations, the director of ground operations, the chief pilot, the continuing airworthiness manager and regional managers.

¹¹⁵ See section 12 of schedule 2 to the collaboration agreement.

We found that the IAG had been meeting regularly under the chairmanship of the NPCC lead for air support, rather than with a rotating chair as specified by the collaboration agreement. The IAG members we interviewed stated that they did not feel that they or other forces were consulted before the National Strategic Board made decisions, and that when proposals for improvements had been made by the IAG, these had not been adopted. Some IAG members also found it difficult to obtain a sufficiently-detailed understanding of the views of operational users across their region, partly because of the number of forces in their region and the officer's other commitments.

Our visits to forces showed that there had been limited interaction between operational users and IAG members, which was thought to be due, in part, to frequent changes of role at assistant chief constable level, leading to inconsistent communication.

We judged that the IAG had not been able to ensure that the National Strategic Board took sufficient account of the views of frontline users, including about performance matters and future air support requirements.

Policy and guidance, including the use of drones

Under ACPO, there had been a number of working groups and similar bodies involved with air support, including specific groups concerned with the use of drones. When we asked for copies of minutes of any NPCC meetings related to air support, we were told that none was available, although we were subsequently provided with copies of two NPCC documents issued in relation to drones: one providing advice to officers regarding the misuse of drones¹¹⁶ and the other providing guidance to forces on their overt use by police.¹¹⁷

We found very little information about air support and drones on the official online repositories of police guidance.¹¹⁸ We found entries on the College of Policing's Authorised Professional Practice (APP) website about air support for police pursuits and the use of tracking equipment in police aircraft to locate stolen vehicles. We also found reference to air support as a tactical option in public order policing and civil emergencies, although in the latter case only in reference to military air support

¹¹⁶ *Guidance to Officers on Drones: Legislation and Dealing with Misuse*, version 3.1, NPCC, 2016, unpublished. An earlier version is available at: www.npcc.police.uk/Publication/NPCC%20FOI/Operations/175%2015%20NPCC%20Response%20Att%2001%20of%2001%2026102015.pdf

¹¹⁷ *Overt Police Use of Drones: Guidance to Forces*, version 2.2, NPCC, September 2016, unpublished.

¹¹⁸ The NPCC website and POLKA, the Police OnLine Knowledge Area, maintained by the College of Policing.

rather than that provided by NPAS.¹¹⁹ There was an entry in the roads policing APP module that listed areas in which air support could be useful, including containment of premises and searching for suspects, high-risk prisoner movements, and searching for missing persons. We found no relevant content in the other APP modules about investigation and missing persons. We also found no content at all related to the use of drones.

Some of the officers we spoke to told us they participated in regional meetings related to NPAS, but none were aware of any regular NPCC-led meetings on air support in general. We learned that although there were regular meetings of the NPCC Strategic Drones Working Group, the only forces directly represented were the Metropolitan Police Service and the Police Service of Northern Ireland (NPAS was also represented). Instead, membership consisted of other organisations operating or concerned with drones, such as the Department for Transport, the Ministry of Defence and the Air Accident Investigation Branch. There was a general lack of knowledge in forces about what was discussed or agreed at these meetings.

One of the key objectives for NPAS is to harness innovation in aviation. Police officers told us that, despite an initial intention to keep police use of drones under review, until very recently NPAS had been largely silent on the matter. This had left forces to make procurement decisions without expert guidance, although some forces had obtained information and advice from the NPCC lead for drones and from the Home Office Centre for Applied Science and Technology.

The relationship between the NPCC and NPAS

A number of people we spoke to expressed concern about how well the NPCC and the National Strategic Board work together.

While the National Strategic Board is responsible for the strategic development of NPAS, the NPCC co-ordinates the operations and transformation of police forces more generally. The NPCC conducts its business through a number of co-ordinating committees, under each of which there are a number of portfolios. At the time of our fieldwork, Chief Constable Simon Byrne was responsible for the air support portfolio, and he was supported by Assistant Chief Constable Steve Barry as the lead for drones.

In 2015/16, the NPCC lead for drones had obtained funding from the Police Innovation Fund to explore the opportunities and threats arising from police use of drones. In 2016/17, the NPCC lead for air support had obtained funding from the same source to explore the potential for emergency service collaboration on air support, including through the use of manned aircraft as well as drones. This 'proof of concept' study assumed that aircraft and drones would be provided by a 'flight partner' but operated to meet the needs of the police service and other partner

¹¹⁹ See: www.app.college.police.uk/

organisations. Although we have seen a draft report from this latter proof of concept study, we understand that the report has not yet been presented to the Chief Constables' Council or shared with local policing bodies.

We were told by NPAS that the National Strategic Board had significant concerns about the latter NPCC study and, as a result, had been unable to support its findings. NPAS staff did not take part in the latter study's working group, and although updates about that study had been provided to the National Strategic Board, board members did not feel they were sufficiently aware of the study's content.

The board believed that the concerns identified by the study about economic pressures and new threats could be progressed with a minimum of risk through the further development of NPAS as a police-led collaboration. NPAS recently submitted a bid for funding from the Police Transformation Fund for a one-year project to produce a national baseline of the police use of drones, which was also intended to assess the potential for collaboration with fire and rescue services and other agencies. Separately, NPAS submitted a bid for funding of a two-year project that would temporarily provide additional air support capacity, in the form of a large helicopter and a large drone intended for coastal surveillance duties. This was intended to allow NPAS to offer additional services to police and non-police users without those users having to meet the associated costs, so that NPAS could learn about meeting such needs and the other organisations could learn about the value of air support to their operations.

The two NPAS bids for funding were considered in May 2017 by the Police Reform and Transformation Board, which brings together chief officers and local policing bodies with other senior leaders.¹²⁰ A bid from the NPCC lead for air support to continue the 2016/17 project on emergency service collaboration was considered at the same time. That board decided not to recommend any of the three bids for further consideration by the Home Office.¹²¹

¹²⁰ For further details about this board, see:

www.npcc.police.uk/NPCCBusinessAreas/ReformandTransformation/PoliceReformandTransformationBoard.aspx

¹²¹ This was because the board considered that NPAS was already capable of increasing its capacity through the existing collaboration arrangements, and because the other two bids both concerned the use of drones and so might better have been submitted as a single bid.

Conclusions and recommendations

Strategic leadership of NPAS

The basis for the strategic leadership of NPAS is the collaboration agreement, with which we found a number of problems. Some weaknesses in transparency were evident; when the Metropolitan Police Service joined the collaboration, for example, they did so on financial terms that were different from those applying to existing members, and from the evidence presented to us, we cannot conclude that existing members were all aware of that fact and its financial implications.

We found it somewhat difficult to determine the current terms of the collaboration agreement. The version available on the NPAS and NPCC websites and the one provided to us by NPAS proved not to be the current version, and in any event, some of the most important content – the schedules about the service to be delivered and about the funding of NPAS – were no longer current but had not been amended.¹²² Within different appendices to the collaboration agreement, there were contradictory definitions of priority for different types of call for service, and material provided by NPAS about newer arrangements for prioritisation was not in a form that could readily be transposed into the collaboration agreement.¹²³

NPAS managers told us that the drafting of the collaboration agreement was intended to avoid creating a supplier/client relationship between West Yorkshire Police and other forces. The collaboration agreement includes, however, a service level agreement that describes NPAS as the ‘service provider’ and police forces in England and Wales as ‘customers’, which clearly indicates the supply of a service by one organisation to the collaborating forces as customers or clients.

The front page of the collaboration agreement shows that the agreement is made between the police bodies in England and Wales¹²⁴ and the PCC for West Yorkshire. On page 1 of the agreement, however, three parties to the agreement are listed: the police bodies and the PCC for West Yorkshire, but additionally the chief constable of West Yorkshire Police. Although a view was expressed to us that the lead local chief constable was the service provider and the lead local policing body’s role was to hold the chief constable to account, we did not consider that view to be consistent with

¹²² Schedules 1 and 8 respectively, which both refer to the prior model of charging according to a set number of flying hours, even though that has not been applied since January 2016.

¹²³ NPAS provided us with papers presented to the Chief Constables’ Council in January 2015 about a new deployment model, but while the papers described the principles of the model, they did not actually describe how it would be operated.

¹²⁴ Defined within the agreement as “each of the Local Policing Bodies (who shall be the contracting body) and their respective Chief Constables/Chief Officers of Police (who shall have operational responsibility for policing operations in their police area)”.

either the wording of the collaboration agreement¹²⁵ or the way that NPAS operates.¹²⁶ We interpret this as meaning that service provision is led jointly by the local policing body for West Yorkshire and the chief constable of West Yorkshire Police.¹²⁷ But the service is not provided by the West Yorkshire police force; in effect, the PCC and chief constable are each responsible for both a police force and a separate business unit that provides police air support to forces across England and Wales.

From an early stage, NPAS governance arrangements have not fully followed the terms of the collaboration agreement signed with forces. Nevertheless, we believe decisions to introduce alternative arrangements were taken with the best intentions, and reflected agreement that the PCC for West Yorkshire would lead the provision of services, and not simply host the national service.¹²⁸

That said, even if the arrangements described in the collaboration agreement had been followed to the letter, we do not believe that this would have led to any greater confidence in them. For one force, the British Transport Police, the arrangements set out in the collaboration agreement do not offer the same opportunities to contribute to NPAS governance as those extended to other forces.¹²⁹ More generally, forces now have plenty of experience with collaborations, but governance arrangements for such local collaborations normally involve face-to-face meetings and decision making that directly involves all collaborating partners. Such arrangements may be

¹²⁵ Clause 8.2 of the agreement states that the lead local policing body “agrees to act in the capacity of Lead Local Policing Body and **to provide the Services** [emphasis added] subject to and in accordance with the terms and conditions of this Agreement”. Additionally, clause 1.2 of schedule 1 to the collaboration agreement states a function of the National Strategic Board is to hold the lead local policing body to account for “the delivery of the service”.

¹²⁶ For example, because the Local Strategic Board is chaired by the PCC’s chief executive.

¹²⁷ The chief constable is the holder of the Police Air Operator’s Certificate for NPAS, which is one type of air operator certificate issued by the CAA. See: www.caa.co.uk/Commercial-industry/Aircraft/Operations/Air-operator-certificates/Air-Operator-Certificates/

¹²⁸ Some collaborations are hosted by one force on behalf of other forces – an example being ACRO, which manages criminal record information on behalf of forces in England and Wales, and which is hosted by Hampshire Constabulary. Other collaborations involve one ‘lead’ force or local policing body providing services to others. The primary differences are that in the ‘lead’ model, the chief constable (or local policing body) is responsible for providing the service, with infrastructure support being provided through the force (or local policing body’s office). In a ‘host’ model, the force or office of the local policing body will provide the infrastructure for the service, but responsibility for providing the service will fall to whomever has been assigned that responsibility (not necessarily the chief constable or local policing body).

¹²⁹ While we go on to recommend that the British Transport Police Authority should join the National Strategic Board as a voting member, we acknowledge that further thought may be needed on the contribution it should make with regard to capital investment, given that BTP contributes capital in a different way to the other forces in the collaboration.

more difficult to achieve in a national collaboration, but we believe that NPAS can only be successful if its governance arrangements provide the same level of confidence that forces have in their local collaborations.

While a national collaboration will always present practical difficulties, we believe that it remains a potentially effective and efficient way of providing police air support. However, improving the confidence of forces and local policing bodies in the collaboration as currently constituted might require:

- redesign of the structure of, and terms for, the collaboration, a matter we shall return to in the final section of this report;
- clear independence for the National Strategic Board from the service provider, which means it would no longer be appropriate for the lead local policing body to act as the board's chair;
- agreement between forces and local policing bodies on the need for a fourth governance body for NPAS (in the form of the Local Strategic Board) in addition to the three that are already required by the collaboration agreement, and clarity about the relative responsibilities of each body;¹³⁰
- clarity on which decisions may be taken by the board and which need to be referred for decision making that directly involves all forces and local policing bodies, perhaps with weighted voting to take account of the population within force areas or forces' use of, or financial contributions to, NPAS;
- governance arrangements to hold the lead local chief constable to account for operational matters and the lead local policing body to account for matters appropriate to their responsibilities¹³¹ – this could involve the lead local policing body being held to account by other local policing bodies, with the lead local chief constable either being held to account by other chief constables or by the lead local policing body;
- greater input to NPAS decision making from force operations leads, with governance structures either using the regions used for NPCC operational purposes or otherwise involving an adequately representative sample of forces (metropolitan, rural, coastal, etc.);
- taking into account the views of NPCC portfolio leads for areas of policing most relevant to air support, such as pursuits, missing persons, acquisitive crime and public order; and

¹³⁰ We understand this is being addressed through the initial review of the collaboration agreement.

¹³¹ These are set out in clause 9 of the collaboration agreement and in its schedules.

- decisions about capital and revenue financing being duly co-ordinated with each other and with decisions about NPAS operating practices.

There may also be value in including HMICFRS within governance arrangements, to provide independent advice on issues of effectiveness and efficiency, as is already the case with governance of the Regional Organised Crime Unit network across England and Wales.¹³²

The collaboration agreement may be varied at any time with the agreement of the National Strategic Board.¹³³ No individual police body is entitled to withdraw unilaterally from the collaboration, although if at least 75 percent of police bodies agree, the collaboration may be terminated.¹³⁴ Taken together, these terms mean that a collaborating force that becomes dissatisfied with the collaboration agreement would need not only to convince other forces that its grounds for dissatisfaction are reasonable, but would also need to convince the majority of forces, if voting at the National Strategic Board meeting was to lead to change. This is a very high hurdle to surmount; a collaboration can only be truly successful if the vast majority of its members are satisfied with it. The even higher hurdle required for termination of the collaboration agreement is, we suspect, almost unreachable, and clearly carries the risk of the collaboration continuing even when the majority of members are in favour of change.

We noted with interest the savings that the Metropolitan Police Service had been promised when it entered the collaboration. Although those arrangements were subsequently amended with the introduction of the calculation of force contributions according to actioned calls for service, the only way that NPAS could have provided the Metropolitan Police Service with those savings was by recovering the associated costs from other forces. We find it difficult to believe that other forces would have agreed to fund guaranteed savings for the Metropolitan Police Service, and therefore suspect that there may never have been a single set of terms and conditions to which all forces and local policing bodies knowingly assented. While this may partly be due to the phased nature of forces' entry into the collaboration, we also believe it highlights the necessity for transparency in the operation of NPAS.

Taking account of our concerns about NPAS governance and transparency, and the concerns we described in the earlier sections of this report about performance and finance, all of which have their origins in the drafting of the collaboration agreement,

¹³² Here, HMICFRS has standing membership of the National ROCU Executive Board, effectively in the capacity of an observer.

¹³³ Clause 26.1.1 of the collaboration agreement.

¹³⁴ Clauses 24.2 and 24.1.1 of the collaboration agreement.

we conclude that current NPAS governance arrangements are unsatisfactory. We make one recommendation about the governance of NPAS in the immediate future but shall return to this matter in the final section of this report.

We found that satisfaction with NPAS services was partly dependent on the quality of communication. NPAS has already recognised that there is a need to improve its external communication, although we believe it must ensure that communication is genuinely two-way. We found that communication was most effective when there were clear structures to support it, but in most regions and for most forces these structures did not exist.

Policy and guidance, including the use of drones

The patchy arrangements for consultation and communication with forces have led to confusion among frontline officers about the longer-term direction for police air support. Police use of drones appears to have developed 'from the bottom up', rather than in accordance with a strategy that, for example, incorporated the use of drones alongside manned aircraft as technology developed.

The NPAS collaboration agreement includes a clause that had foreseen a review of the national police air support strategy would begin in December 2013. That review is now several years overdue.

The signatories to any operational collaboration may need to make difficult decisions in order to focus resources on areas of greatest need, even if this leaves safer or more sparsely-populated communities with lower levels of air support. We believe that a clear air support strategy, agreed collectively by chief officers and local policing bodies, makes it more likely that these tough decisions will be made.

We do not think that the current level of uncertainty should be allowed to continue. A new strategic approach is needed, and because it will take time to develop, there will need to be interim measures to ensure efficient use of public money.

We were surprised to find so little mention of air support in APP, a matter that NPAS managers had identified but that they had been unable to resolve to their satisfaction. Clear guidance is needed to ensure that air support forms part of wider policing strategies and that it is used in an appropriate manner by all forces.

The relationship between the NPCC and NPAS

The NPCC lead for air support and the West Yorkshire PCC had separately sought funding from the Home Office to develop options for the future of air support, even though their proposals were addressing broadly the same concerns.

Neither the current NPCC lead nor the chief constable responsible for the operation of NPAS can be expected to provide answers to questions that require the active participation of their peers across 42 other forces, and each officer has primary responsibilities that limit the time and energy they can offer.¹³⁵

We believe that a separation of responsibilities at chief officer level makes sense, with one officer leading on the longer-term development of police air support and the other concentrating their time and energy on maximising the operational effectiveness and efficiency of NPAS. As both chief officers are members of the National Strategic Board, there should be ample opportunity to ensure that their respective duties are undertaken in a co-ordinated fashion and alongside the responsibilities of local policing bodies.

¹³⁵ For example, Chief Constable Collins estimated that at the busiest times of the year, as much as 20 percent of her week might be devoted to NPAS business.

We make the following recommendations:

Recommendations

3. By March 2018, the NPCC lead for air support should publish an interim operational strategy for all currently available forms of air support including drones, and publish a plan to improve communication on police air support between frontline officers, police managers, NPAS, chief officers and the College of Policing.
4. By July 2018, the Chief Constables' Council should establish a high-level outline of the operational outcomes that air support (in all its forms) should facilitate. This should inform the development, by March 2019, of a new air support strategy by the NPCC lead for air support in conjunction with local policing bodies and NPAS.
5. There should continue to be separation between strategic leadership on police air support and the day-to-day management of NPAS. Both require contributions from chief constables and local policing bodies, according to their statutory responsibilities. But at least in the short term, the roles of the chief officer leading NPCC policy development and the chief constable responsible for the operation of NPAS should continue to be filled by different individuals.
6. To enhance confidence in the ability of the National Strategic Board to set strategic direction and to oversee performance management, as soon as practicable, a local policing body member of the board other than the lead local policing body should be appointed as chair of the board.
7. As soon as practicable, the collaboration agreement should be amended to permit a British Transport Police chief officer and a representative of the British Transport Police Authority to join the National Strategic Board as voting members. The National Strategic Board should also invite a British Transport Police officer to participate in the Independent Assurance Group.
8. Following analysis of force use of air support tactics and after receipt of subject matter expert advice through relevant NPCC portfolio leads, the College of Policing should update all references to air support in existing Authorised Professional Practice. The College should also update other APP modules identified after consultation with the NPCC lead for air support and NPAS, such as those concerning investigation and missing persons.

Operational management

Judgment

- The police service needs to develop a common understanding of the demand for air support and its contribution to police effectiveness and efficiency. Only then can shared, evidence-based decisions be made about the right mix of drones, helicopters and fixed-wing aircraft, and about collaboration with non-police partners.

Findings

The demand for police air support

In 2016, NPAS received 66,780 calls for service from police forces,¹³⁶ and aircraft were despatched in response to 86 percent of those calls (57,562).¹³⁷ An aircraft arrived on scene on 29,028 occasions,¹³⁸ which equates to 43 percent of all calls for service and which is a similar attendance rate to the 2014/15 business year.¹³⁹

If flights related to aircraft relocation and maintenance are excluded, the remaining actioned calls for service were for the reasons shown in Figure 7. The greatest demand was for support to crimes in action, including to search for a suspect on foot (32 percent) or in/on a vehicle (8 percent), and for supporting the management of such incidents (8 percent). Another significant area of demand was the search for missing or absent persons (28 percent).

An immediate response is likely to be required for searches for people and vehicles during the actual commission of a crime. Pre-planned tasks are, by definition, unlikely to need an immediate response. Other types of calls for service may, or may not, be urgent. For instance, support to the deployment of firearms officers might be

¹³⁶ NPAS recorded 66,950 calls for service, of which 170 were classified as being in connection with testing, training, relocation or maintenance.

¹³⁷ Data provided by NPAS.

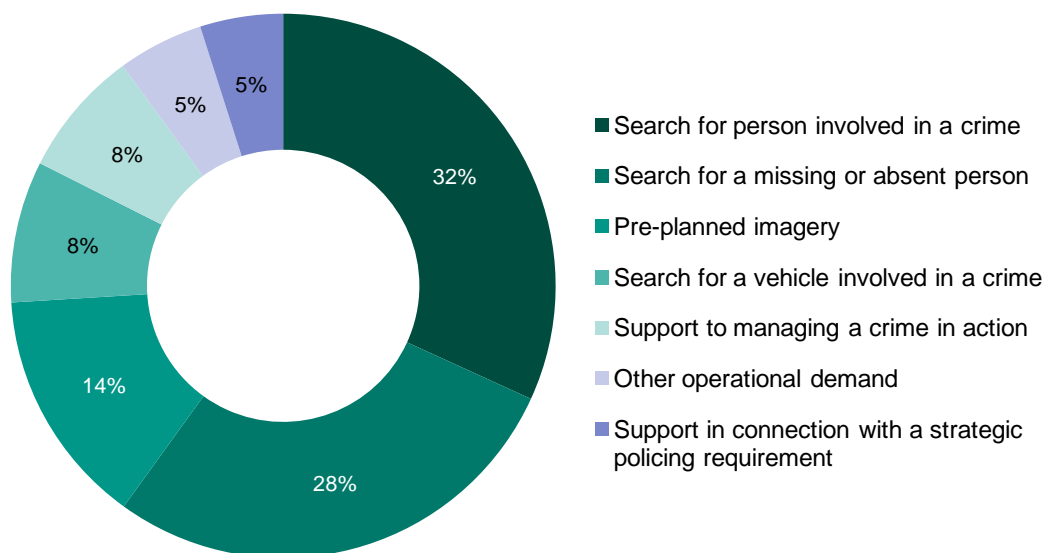
¹³⁸ Aircraft may be despatched but not arrive on scene for a number of reasons, including technical and weather problems, diversion to a more urgent call, or most commonly, because the force cancels the request before the aircraft has arrived.

¹³⁹ In 2014/15, NPAS received 62,920 requests for air support and attended 28,499 incidents (45 percent).

pre-planned or in response to an emergency call. Overall, it appears that over half of all calls for air support require an immediate response, and the proportion could be as high as 75 percent.¹⁴⁰

This assessment is supported by information provided to us by NPAS managers, who told us about the use of air support by different forces in the years preceding NPAS. They had learned that although about 23 percent of deployments by the Metropolitan Police Service were pre-planned, for other forces the corresponding figure was less than 2 percent. This reflected the fact that in London there was a proportionately greater number of assignments related to security and to crowd control at public events.

Figure 7: Reasons for actioned calls for service in 2016¹⁴¹



Source: Data provided to HMICFRS by NPAS in January 2017

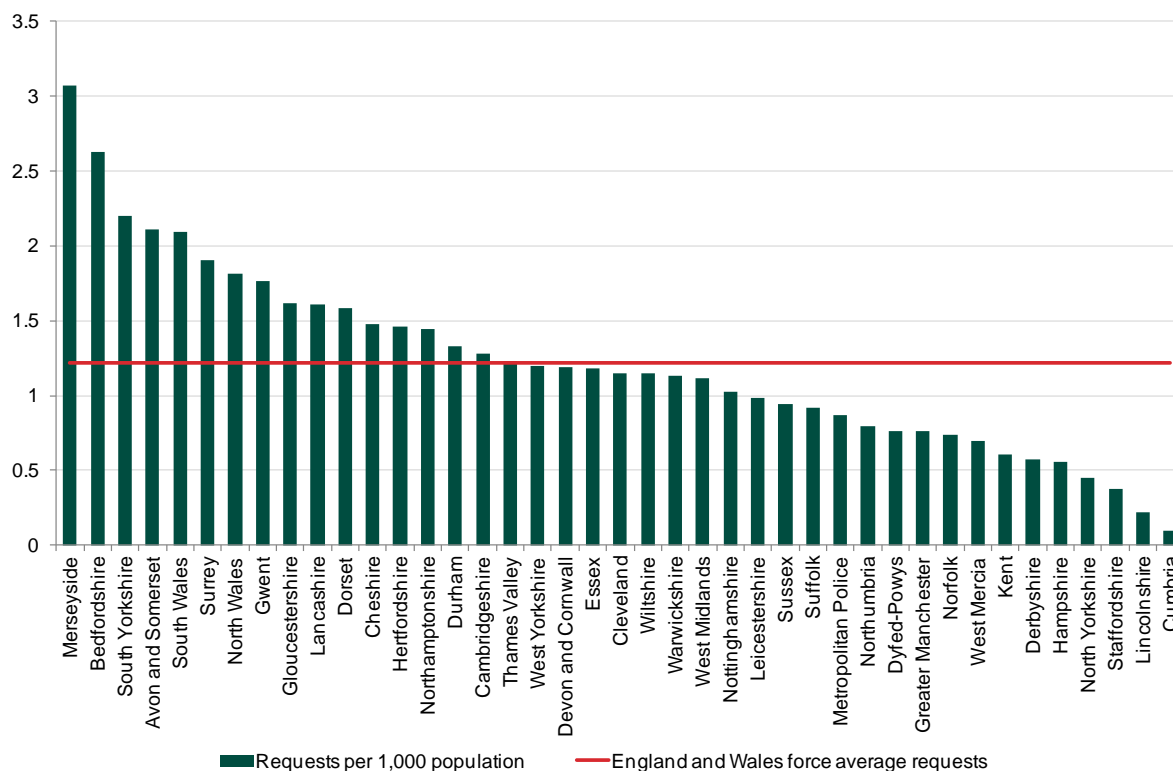
We found that NPAS, and indeed the police service as a whole, had only made a limited assessment of the overall demand for air support. NPAS had produced a strategic assessment in June 2016, and although this contained data on the number of requests for service made to NPAS, there was no analysis of underlying changes in criminality or in the volume or nature of other policing tasks that might require air support. The strategic assessment had concluded that ‘operational service delivery’ was a high-priority risk, but the nature and extent of that risk was not clearly

¹⁴⁰ As Figure 7 shows, 48 percent of actioned calls for service related to searches for persons or vehicles involved in crime and to supporting management of a crime in action. The higher figure of 75 percent would apply if the majority of searches for missing persons and for supporting other operational demand also required an immediate response.

¹⁴¹ An actioned call for service is one where an aircraft arrived on scene following a call for service and provided some operational support.

explained. The analysis showed that service level agreement national targets had been met, and it was identified that the need to withdraw aircraft in the coming years to fit them with new technology might affect performance.¹⁴² Response time performance for each force individually was not reviewed, however. Although the strategic assessment included assessment of risk in various areas, it had not taken account of Management of Risk in Law Enforcement (MoRiLE) methodology¹⁴³ and, overall, we were not convinced that the assessment would have been particularly helpful in informing decisions by NPAS managers or the National Strategic Board.

Figure 8: Requests for air support, per 1,000 population, by force in 2016¹⁴⁴



Source: Data provided to HMICFRS by NPAS in January 2017 and ONS 2015 mid-year population estimates

¹⁴² As a result of the 2013 Clutha tragedy, the CAA now requires NPAS to install cockpit voice and flight data recorders in all its aircraft. Additionally, the replacement of the current police radio system with the new tri-service Emergency Services Network will require the fitting of new radios in all NPAS aircraft.

¹⁴³ MoRiLE is an NPCC programme that has produced a set of standard assessment tools approved by the Chief Constables' Council. Although the MoRiLE Thematic Model was created to provide forces with a standardised way of assessing different areas of policing demand and force capacity and capability to meet those demands, communication with the MoRiLE project team confirmed that it could be readily adapted for use by an organisation such as NPAS.

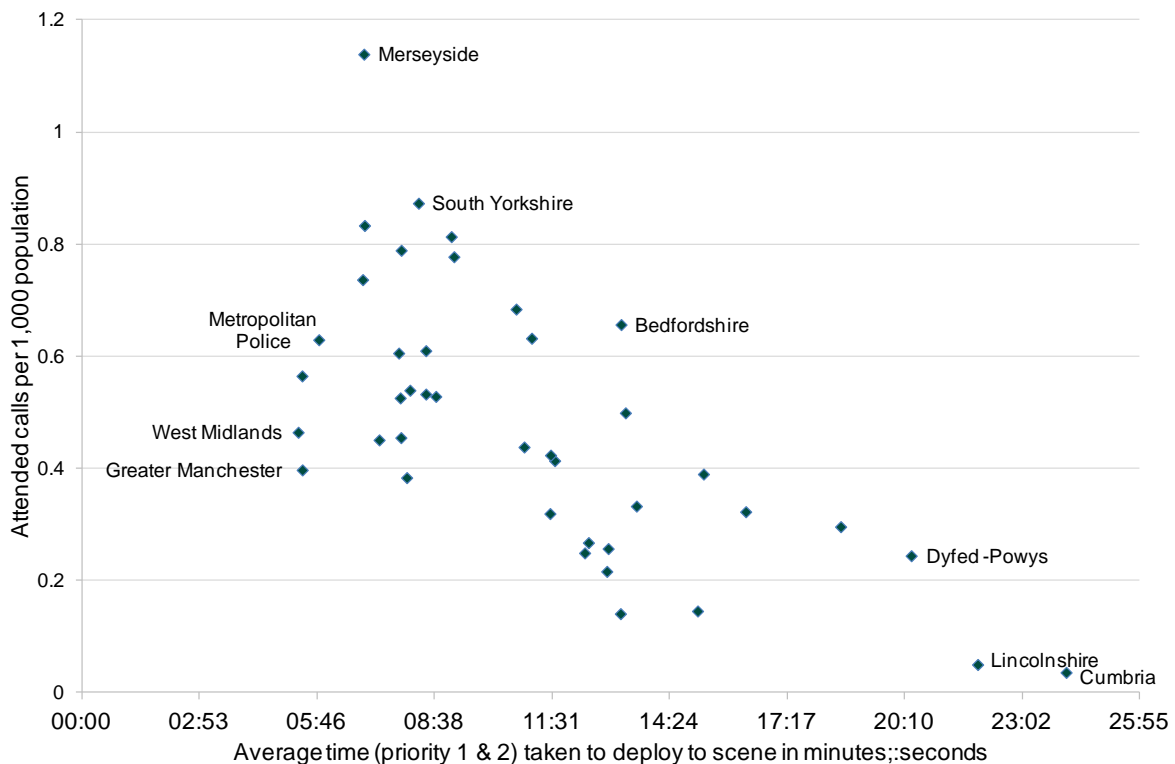
¹⁴⁴ City of London Police has been excluded because the force only made two calls for service in 2016 and because the resident population figure does not reflect the volume of people who visit the City each day. Humberside Police has been excluded because the force only joined NPAS in September 2016, meaning data for a whole year are not available.

To provide further insight, we analysed the expressed demand from different forces for support from NPAS. To facilitate comparisons between forces of different sizes and in the absence of readily available data on latent demand, we conducted our analysis taking account of population figures (see Figure 8).

Some forces made far more requests for air support than others, even after taking population size into account. In 2016, Merseyside Police made the most calls for air support, with a rate more than twice the average for forces in England and Wales. In contrast, Lincolnshire Police and Cumbria Constabulary made very limited use of air support, with rates of around one-fifth and one-tenth respectively of the average across England and Wales.¹⁴⁵

While this may reflect historical usage patterns, officers in some forces told us that they sometimes did not call for air support when it might have been operationally beneficial, because their experience was that, even if despatched, an aircraft would not arrive quickly enough. Using data from 2016, we considered the extent to which average response time affected the frequency with which a force used air support (see Figure 9).

Figure 9: Number of requests for air support that were attended per 1,000 population compared with average travelling time



Source: Data provided to HMICFRS by NPAS in January 2017 and ONS 2015 mid-year population estimates

¹⁴⁵ These two forces were among those which did not have access to air support pre-NPAS.

In general, forces with quicker average response times used air support more frequently, but this factor alone does not account for the total level of variation between forces. For instance, Merseyside Police used air support two to three times as often as other metropolitan forces such as the West Midlands Police and Greater Manchester Police, despite having a slower average response time. Allowing for the fact that population will not be an exact predictor of demand for air support, there must therefore be other factors that influence force decision making when officers are considering calling for air support.

NPAS bases now all have 24-hour, 7-day-a-week operation (previously, some air support units in forces had operated only for limited hours, or on certain days of the week). In some forces, officers told us that there was a problem with aircraft availability at the time of NPAS shift changes, which was exacerbated because shifts changed at all NPAS bases at the same times. When we asked NPAS management for their views on this, they stated that they were not aware of any problem, although they subsequently provided us with data about the number of requests for service that NPAS had declined at different times of the day; the data appeared to support the claims that simultaneous shift changes at 7.00pm were creating a gap in aircraft availability.

Figure 10: Calls for service declined for crew-related reasons by hour of the day in 201

Time - one
hour from

hour from	Mon	Tue	Wed	Thu	Fri	Sat	Sun	Total
00:00	22	9	26	13	25	17	26	138
01:00	22	14	18	20	19	28	30	151
02:00	24	10	10	26	16	23	20	129
03:00	21	13	13	17	19	23	24	130
04:00	27	10	9	14	16	15	26	117
05:00	10	11	4	9	18	12	25	89
06:00	13	9	10	10	5	15	17	79
07:00	3	1	5	1	4	2	7	23
08:00	2	4	3	3	6	1	1	20
09:00	3	5	10	6	12	2	2	40
10:00	7	6	6	10	11	5	2	47
11:00	4	4	8	6	8	2	4	36
12:00	12	7	6	10	7	4	2	48
13:00	8	7	3	6	8	3	1	36
14:00	10	11	5	12	12	4	1	55
15:00	8	6	8	10	5	9	3	49
16:00	6	4	16	15	9	9	10	69
17:00	13	12	13	18	9	19	15	99
18:00	33	32	27	38	53	49	46	278
19:00	13	12	10	17	16	9	13	90
20:00	11	20	4	12	21	8	12	88
21:00	7	5	11	7	18	11	7	66
22:00	7	15	10	9	17	10	13	81
23:00	9	21	18	22	14	14	19	117
Total	295	248	253	311	348	294	326	2,075

Source: Data provided to HMICFRS by NPAS in January 2017

Note: Darker shades show that a higher number of requests were declined. Calls declined for reasons of bad weather, aircraft fault and similar issues are not included, so that the reason for the declines shown is in some way related to crew availability.

The full set of data also indicated that demand, in the form of calls for service, was not consistent throughout the day, or on each day of the week. With current levels of resourcing, NPAS cannot fully meet the demands made of it by police forces, predominantly between the hours of 5.00pm and 5.00am. One NPAS manager we spoke to had recently estimated that, even allowing for peaks in demand, the demand from forces for air support in one region outstripped NPAS capacity by about three-and-a-half times.

The NPAS Accountable Manager subsequently told us that, as with many areas of policing, it is not unusual for demand to exceed the capacity of available resources. Forces must therefore prioritise, and some areas of demand are likely not to be allocated any resources as a result. He told us that these matters were considered by National Strategic Board members in January 2015, when some members had

been in favour of reducing the NPAS budget by 28 percent, but a decision had been taken to reduce it by only 14 percent. This decision reflected a balance between reducing force contributions to NPAS and reducing force expenditure in other areas, given that all forces were experiencing and anticipating longer-term reductions in funding.

Responding to demand

In 2008/09 (prior to NPAS), the 33 police aircraft in England and Wales flew a total of 32,652 hours, representing an average of 989 hours per aircraft. Use of individual aircraft ranged from 350 hours a year (Norfolk Constabulary) to 1,600 hours (West Midlands Police). A 2009 ACPO strategy review¹⁴⁶ estimated that if a national service made air support available to the four forces without dedicated access to it,¹⁴⁷ total annual flying hours would increase to 34,000, with an average of 1,200 hours flown by each aircraft.

NPAS provided us with details of the hours flown by their aircraft between 2014/15 and 2016/17.¹⁴⁸ In 2014/15, while forces were still transferring their aircraft to NPAS, 22 aircraft flew a total of 18,529 hours, an average of 842 hours per aircraft.¹⁴⁹ By 2015/16, that average had fallen to 733 hours (19,067 hours flown by 26 aircraft),¹⁵⁰ but by 2016/17 it had increased to 937 hours (17,800 hours flown by 19 aircraft). Although these figures show a degree of consistency from 2013/14 onwards, we were nevertheless surprised to see a 45 percent decrease in the number of hours flown between 2008/09 and 2016/17, as well as lower aircraft use than was anticipated in 2009.

NPAS can only deploy the aircraft that it has available on any given day. The current planning assumption is that two of the 19 helicopters will be undergoing routine maintenance at any given time, leaving up to 17 available for operational deployment (there are always likely to be some aircraft unavailable because of technical faults that have developed). However, when we visited NPAS in Wakefield in February 2017, we found that there were only eight aircraft available for operational deployment that day, and one of those had a fault that restricted it to daytime flying only. Two further aircraft were serviceable but deployed on training duties, meaning

¹⁴⁶ See Appendix B for more information about this review.

¹⁴⁷ These being Cumbria Constabulary, Kent Police, Lincolnshire Police and North Yorkshire Police, although Kent Police did 'buy in' some air support from nearby forces.

¹⁴⁸ In 2013/14, NPAS aircraft had flown 16,215 hours; see page 3 of the *NPAS Annual Report 2013/14*.

¹⁴⁹ A further 5,747 hours were flown in 2014/15 by aircraft operated by police forces that had yet to join NPAS.

¹⁵⁰ This excludes 16 hours flown between January and March 2016 by an aircraft transferred from Dyfed-Powys Police, which NPAS subsequently sold.

that the remaining nine aircraft were unavailable because of planned maintenance, faults or technical upgrades. It appeared to us, therefore, that one reason for the reduction in overall flying hours could be reduced aircraft availability when compared with the pre-NPAS period.

When we discussed this with NPAS management, they told us that they produced daily reports showing aircraft readiness by the hour and received monthly reports from their maintenance provider on aircraft availability. They did not, however, routinely combine these data to produce reports showing overall aircraft availability.¹⁵¹ They further stated that this day's level of aircraft availability was lower than normal and that they were usually able to deploy between 10 and 14 aircraft each day, and as a result had a normal staffing level of 15 crews (for two shifts a day).¹⁵²

The material provided to us by NPAS showed that the modelling of response times contained a number of weaknesses, of which NPAS management were aware:

- it assumed the deployment of four fixed-wing aircraft, even though these were not yet in operation;
- it made no allowance for abstraction of aircraft for upgrades; and
- it did not allow sufficiently for the increased frequency with which faults develop in older aircraft.

We were therefore disappointed that in March 2017 NPAS used such modelling to justify the decision by the National Strategic Board to close three bases. The modelling gave an unrealistic picture of likely real-world response times, and there was no reference to the actual response times recently experienced by the forces likely to be most affected by the closure of those bases.¹⁵³

¹⁵¹ NPAS told us that reporting on aircraft availability was sometimes produced for meetings of the NPAS National and Local Strategic Boards.

¹⁵² This means that NPAS can operate up to 15 helicopters simultaneously, assuming that no more than four are unavailable for reasons of maintenance, etc.

¹⁵³ Although NPAS has now amended the news article dated 6 March 2017 at www.npas.police.uk/news/npas-15-base-model, it had previously stated that "With our 15 24/7 bases across England and Wales, we will still be able to reach 92 percent of the population within 20 minutes and 97 percent within 30 minutes." The bases closed were at Wattisham in Suffolk, with the average response time for Suffolk Police in 2016 (before the base closure) being 30 minutes and neighbouring Norfolk Police being 40 minutes; at Warton in Lancashire, with the average response time in 2016 for Lancashire Police and Cumbria Constabulary being 28 minutes and 66 minutes respectively; and at Durham Tees Valley in County Durham, with the average response time in 2016 being 19 minutes for Durham Police and 18 minutes for Cleveland Police, but 31 minutes for North Yorkshire Police.

NPAS introduced a new deployment model in 2016, which had been developed by the National Strategic Board and approved by the Chief Constables' Council in January 2015. This places requests for air support into one of three categories: the highest priority is for requests related to the Strategic Policing Requirement (SPR);¹⁵⁴ next are those calls concerning a crime in action; and requests related to local policing priorities are given lower priority. Each category contains different types of task, and these were placed into the different categories taking account of feedback from a survey of chief officer teams. The principle agreed by chief officers was that calls for service allocated to the highest category were those that 'must' receive a response, and that calls in the second and third categories would receive a response subject to aircraft availability and assessment of relative priority.

During our fieldwork, we found that many forces were concerned with what was described to us as the 'Wakefield effect'. This term was used to describe the fact that a request for service may not lead to an immediate decision on aircraft deployment, instead generating a request back to a force for further information and, sometimes, the suggestion of alternatives to the use of air support. In these cases, by the time the requested information had been provided or the alternatives discounted, the need for air support had often passed. It is important to stress that, although this issue was mentioned by the majority of forces, and some had recently started to log incidents of concern, none was able to provide clear evidence of poor practice by NPAS.

Before NPAS, a force would have the final say on the deployment of its helicopter, but now NPAS despatchers are the final decision makers, potentially considering simultaneous requests from different forces and the deployment of aircraft across 43 force areas. We acknowledge this and recognise that the quality and timeliness of the information provided to NPAS despatchers by forces will have a significant effect on the timeliness of deployment decisions. NPAS managers told us that any perceived delays simply reflected the extent to which forces provided sufficiently detailed information at the point of first contact.

We looked at the performance information shared with us by NPAS, and found that, on average, NPAS despatched an aircraft to a priority 1 call within ten-and-a-half minutes, and within 22 minutes for a priority 2 call.¹⁵⁵ However, there was considerable variation between forces, with the average receipt of call to despatch times for priority 1 calls ranging from about three-and-a-half minutes for Cleveland Police to more than 21 minutes for Cumbria Constabulary, and for priority 2 calls from about five minutes for the Metropolitan Police Service to nearly 44 minutes for

¹⁵⁴ The Strategic Policing Requirement is available from: www.gov.uk/government/publications/strategic-policing-requirement

¹⁵⁵ Descriptions of the differing priority levels follow in the section on performance.

Cumbria Constabulary.¹⁵⁶ We were unable to explore this area in further depth during our study and we recognise that decision making is only part of the despatch process.¹⁵⁷ Nonetheless, given the level of variation and an average of over ten minutes to deploy an aircraft in even the most urgent of cases, unless this average is solely a result of lack of aircraft availability,¹⁵⁸ there is a need to improve the timeliness of deployment decision making.

A concern expressed by a significant number of NPAS staff during our fieldwork was that changes in tasking arrangements have led to most travel on return from incidents being unproductive. This is because forces perceive that they will effectively be charged twice for one flight – once for responding to the original incident to which the aircraft was called, and once again for undertaking non-urgent work on the return flight. In the past, the crews would have used the return journey to undertake non-urgent work that had been saved for the next practical opportunity and, although this may have been recorded as an additional deployment, little or no additional cost would have been incurred. If NPAS operated in this way, this would still be the case, but forces' desire to reduce their contributions to NPAS appears to be having a perverse effect on the financial efficiency of NPAS.

In May 2014, the National Strategic Board approved the procurement of three fixed-wing aircraft to reduce ongoing NPAS revenue costs and offer additional capabilities. Fixed-wing aircraft tend to be cheaper to purchase and operate, and can require a smaller crew, but they also offer advantages of quicker transit speeds and extended flight duration. In February 2015, the board decided to add a fourth fixed-wing aircraft, to allow three to be deployed operationally while one was released for maintenance. However, we found NPAS managers were uncertain where and how these aircraft would be deployed, and what effect their use would have on levels of service to forces. While there was an ongoing programme of work to deal with this, we were surprised that such procurement decisions had been made without a clear plan for deployment of these aircraft and a detailed understanding of the implications.

¹⁵⁶ NPAS managers told us that they believed one reason for differences between forces in the average time taken to despatch an aircraft was the way forces contracted them. Routine communication is either by electronic transfer of incident records or by telephone, but NPAS also operates a radio 'hailing channel', which is intended to allow immediate voice communication between a force control room and NPAS despatchers in Wakefield in the most urgent cases. It was suggested that some forces made better use of this option than others.

¹⁵⁷ NPAS managers told us that some of the differences could also be due to self-deployment of NPAS aircraft by crews monitoring local force radio channels. Because bases provide support to a number of forces, it is not practicable for air crews to monitor the radio channels of all nearby forces; this could lead to crews monitoring the channels of the closest forces and thereby responding to calls from those forces more quickly on average.

¹⁵⁸ The variation between regions suggests that this is likely to be a factor, although the variation within regions suggests it is not the only factor.

Conclusions and recommendations

The demand for police air support

Although forces' use of drones could have reduced demand for air support from NPAS to some degree,¹⁵⁹ we saw no evidence during our study that demand for air support had reduced significantly in recent years. We were therefore concerned to see a considerable decline in flying hours, from 32,652 in 2008/09 to 17,800 in 2016/17. Although the 2009 review had found some over-capacity, and the 2010 paper to the Chief Constables' Council found potential efficiency savings of 6.5 percent, there has actually been a 45 percent reduction in the number of hours flown.

To inform decisions on the size of a national aircraft fleet, we believe it is necessary to understand not only the patent demand being made upon NPAS, but also the latent demand arising from criminal behaviour and police activity.¹⁶⁰ We found that while NPAS had good information about patent demand, it had no processes in place to explore latent demand.

We established that some forces were placing greater demand on NPAS than other forces, even allowing for factors such as geography. We believe that the differences are likely to be the result of either or both of the following: underlying differences in the occurrence of the kinds of crime and incident that lead to calls for air support; or application of different tasking models for deployment of air support, either because forces are assessing risk and mitigation options differently or because some are taking greater account than others of other factors, such as a desire to reduce cost.

Taken together, these facts suggest it would be difficult to conclude that NPAS has achieved its key objective of maximising the benefits of air support to frontline policing. We would suggest instead that the police service, through the decisions made by chief constables and by the National Strategic Board, has actually sought not to maximise the benefits of air support, but to strike a balance between assessed risk and available resources, something that we would naturally not seek to criticise. Whether this key objective was or remains an appropriate one, however, is a matter to which we shall return in the final section of this report.

¹⁵⁹ We describe force use of drones in the section below on future options.

¹⁶⁰ By patent, we mean the demand expressed through forces making calls to NPAS for air support. By latent, we mean the demand associated with force responses to crimes and other incidents that could have been enhanced through the use of air support, but where no such request is made to NPAS. That might occur for a number of reasons, including a perception, whether accurate or otherwise, that air support would not be provided, or concerns about the costs that calling for support would occur.

Responding to demand

We were concerned that the modelling undertaken to inform decisions on the size of the NPAS fleet had been over-optimistic, taking insufficient account of likely aircraft abstractions and the time necessary for deployment decisions to be made. As a result, we are concerned that the decisions made by chief officers in 2010 and by the National Strategic Board in 2015 about how many aircraft are needed and where to locate them were not based on the best information available. Had better modelling been available, different decisions might have been made. In any event, we believe NPAS is now mature enough for the National Strategic Board to be able to make decisions taking account of the actual levels of service delivered to different forces, as well as improved modelling of options for change.

Some forces had expressed concern about the design of the NPAS deployment model. We were satisfied that although there is scope to refine the terminology used within the model, it nevertheless provides a framework for common understanding of agreed priorities for air support, and that in any event actual deployment decisions are made and recorded using the widely-recognised National Decision Model. We note, however, that the vast majority of air support provided by NPAS in 2016 was not at the highest level of priority, and believe that it is vital not to overlook the importance of timely air support to 'crimes in action'.

We heard complaints from most forces about delays in aircraft deployment decisions. Our study did not allow us to explore these areas in detail, so we were unable to determine the causes of these delays. We readily understand the frustrations expressed by force incident managers and control room staff, however. A delay in decision making could mean that an aircraft is despatched but will not arrive in time to be of use, or that by the time a decision is made an aircraft can no longer arrive in time to be of use, and so will not be despatched. As force confidence in the process is arguably as important as the efficiency of the process itself, further work is required here.

We were concerned about one particular matter of efficiency. NPAS staff repeatedly told us that changes in tasking arrangements have meant that most travel on return from incidents is now unproductive. This is clearly wasteful, and we believe that one way to deal with this would be to share NPAS fixed costs more equitably between forces and thereby reduce the effective cost of each individual allocated task.

We have considered carefully how to interpret the significant reduction since 2008/09 in the total number of flying hours. On the one hand, we note that the annual total of hours flown started to decline in the years immediately before NPAS was created;¹⁶¹ it was suggested to us that forces may have sought to make savings as a result of

¹⁶¹ In 2008/09, a total of 32,652 hours were flown by police aircraft. By 2011/12, the year immediately preceding the creation of NPAS, that figure had fallen to 26,437 hours (reported on page 4 of the NPAS Annual Report 2014/15).

the 2010 Spending Review. However, the number of requests for air support made since NPAS was created has risen from 54,225 requests in 2013/14 to 66,237 requests in 2015/16, suggesting that the apparent reduction in police use of air support before NPAS was created was short-lived.¹⁶²

NPAS managers suggested to us that the introduction of the new deployment model was one reason for the reduction in the number of flying hours; both forces and NPAS were now more carefully considering requests for air support against criteria related to threat, risk and harm. A further phase of reduction in annual flying hours, however, had started before the new deployment model was introduced.¹⁶³ Furthermore, demand from forces since April 2015 has been largely static,¹⁶⁴ and the new deployment model appears to have had only a marginal effect on NPAS deployment decisions.¹⁶⁵

We considered whether force investment in drones had changed the demand from forces for NPAS services. From the evidence we collected during interviews in forces, however, there was little suggestion that this had been the case, and so we have discounted that as a significant reason for the reduction in flying hours.

In recent years, the numbers of aircraft and bases from which they operate have also been reduced. The expectation might have been that with the increased demand since 2013/14 and no significant change to deployment decision making in recent years, reductions in the number of aircraft and bases would have led to an increase in the total number of hours flown, as fewer aircraft would have to cover as much of the demand as was feasible over a wider area. But we found that the average number of hours flown by each aircraft had slightly decreased in comparison with 2008/09.

We note that relatively few requests for air support are declined by NPAS.¹⁶⁶ We therefore draw a tentative conclusion that the main reason for the significant reduction in the total number of hours flown is the reduction in the number of operating bases: most air support is required immediately, and having fewer and

¹⁶² Figures taken from *NPAS Annual Report 2013/14*, NPAS, page 10 and from *NPAS Annual Report 2015/16*, NPAS, page 8.

¹⁶³ By 2014/15, the total number of hours flown by police aircraft had fallen to 24,276; in 2015/16, it fell further, to 19,083 hours.

¹⁶⁴ NPAS reported 66,237 calls for service in 2015/16 and 66,780 calls in the calendar year 2016, suggesting limited change in force decision making between April 2015 and December 2016.

¹⁶⁵ The proportion of calls for service that were declined by NPAS was 13 percent in 2014/15 and 12 percent in 2015/16, the first year in which the new deployment model was used.

¹⁶⁶ In 2016, 14 percent (9,178) of requests for service were declined, with the primary reasons being poor weather (39 percent of requests declined) and lack of aircraft/crew availability (26 percent of requests declined).

more distant aircraft means that less of the demand for air support can realistically be met. This conclusion is supported by: our analysis showing that at least half and perhaps as many as three-quarters of actioned calls for service in 2016 required an immediate response; the information we received about the nature of air support demand in and outside London prior to the creation of NPAS; and the feedback we received during our fieldwork, when we frequently heard that frontline officers were no longer requesting air support because it would either be unavailable or would not arrive in time to be of use. It is also supported by the National Strategic Board's apparent judgment that fixed-wing aircraft, which can travel more quickly than helicopters, might help to increase the overall capacity of NPAS.

We were told by NPAS managers, however, that a fixed-wing aircraft will take at least twice if not three times as long as a helicopter to take off, and this might mean that it is more suited to tasks requiring long flying durations than those requiring an immediate response.¹⁶⁷ We were therefore somewhat surprised that the board had taken the decision to purchase four fixed-wing aircraft based on the results of a limited trial and with limited analysis of their effectiveness.

We considered the impact of the reduction in total flying hours on police forces. Because NPAS has fewer aircraft available across England and Wales than there were before 2012, and because most calls for service require an immediate response, we believe the reduction in fleet size is likely to have had a direct and adverse impact on force effectiveness.

¹⁶⁷ During our research, we visited the Air Support Unit of the Police Service of Northern Ireland, which operates helicopters, drones and fixed-wing aircraft. We learned that the type of aircraft used was determined by the requirements of the task at hand, with response policing needs generally being met through the use of helicopters.

We make the following recommendations:

Recommendations

9. By July 2018, the NPCC lead for air support should oversee data collection and analysis in a limited number of forces (taking account of use of air support in proportion to population figures and any other readily available data), with a view to uncovering the reasons for differences in the use of air support tactics. Chief constables should use the results from this exercise to review their use of air support.
10. The NPCC lead for air support should work with other relevant NPCC portfolio leads and NPAS to produce, by December 2018, a comprehensive assessment of latent and patent demand for air support. This assessment should take account of the development of force management statements and be repeated from time to time to inform decisions on the composition and deployment of the police aircraft fleet.
11. With immediate effect, the NPAS chief operating officer should review the impact of shift changes and consider staggering shift changeover times at its bases, involving and informing forces throughout.
12. By July 2018, the NPCC lead for air support should carry out and publish a review of the NPAS deployment process, including forces' compliance with guidance on the use of air support and the timeliness of NPAS decision making.
13. By March 2018, NPAS should communicate to forces its plans for the use of fixed-wing aircraft. After a suitable period, there should be a review of their effectiveness and efficiency; adequate steps should be taken to correct any shortcomings revealed in the review.

Specialist user requirements

Findings

Although most police air support concerns crimes in action and other emergencies, a small proportion is undertaken in support of operations against terrorism and serious and organised crime. Because of the covert nature of those operations, we cannot comment on them in detail here.

NPAS receives an annual allocation from the Counter-Terrorism Police Grant in recognition of support provided for counter-terrorism purposes. We were surprised to find that NPAS was unable to calculate the costs it had occurred on counter-terrorism work. There were several reasons for this:

- Air support for counter-terrorism training and exercises was not treated as being provided in connection with a call for service, so there was no direct link between this work and the method used by NPAS for calculating force contributions.
- Coding of calls for service did not differentiate between specialist firearms operations with a counter-terrorism context and those with an organised crime or other criminal context.
- The distinction between air support for 'security' and 'counter-terrorism' purposes was unclear (e.g. if air support was provided to the State Opening of Parliament, it was unclear if this was because of the responsibilities of the Metropolitan Police Service for security at public events in London, or because of a terrorist threat to those attending).¹⁶⁸

The recent and current threat from terrorism also meant that NPAS maintains a specific response capability for counter-terrorism operations at all times. This has the effect of reducing the number of aircraft available for general policing duties, but NPAS had not calculated the effective cost of maintaining this level of readiness. Overall, NPAS managers believed that the cost of counter-terrorism operations was not fully covered by the funding received for that purpose, but they were unable to show what the shortfall was.

NPAS undertakes few deployments related to serious and organised crime other than those involving pre-planned aerial imagery (e.g. of premises suspected of being used for the cultivation of drugs).

¹⁶⁸ The Metropolitan Police Service and the City of London Police receive additional revenue funding each year through the National and International Capital City Grant (worth £178m in 2017/18), because of the particular demands of policing the UK's capital city. Revenue funding for specific counter-terrorism policing tasks is provided through the separate Counter-Terrorism Police Grant.

Conclusions and recommendations

Because NPAS cannot determine how much its support to counter-terrorism operations has actually cost, it is unable to assure forces and local policing bodies that it has recovered an appropriate contribution from counter-terrorism budgets. Any revenue cost over and above the amount of counter-terrorism funding received by NPAS will therefore have been met from police budgets. Given the evolving nature of the terrorist threat in the UK and the funding made available by the government for counter-terrorism policing, we do not consider this to be an acceptable state of affairs.

A similar issue applies to deployments related to the policing of London as the UK's capital city, which is the subject of specific additional funding.

We make the following recommendations:¹⁶⁹

Recommendations

14. By March 2018, the National Strategic Board should facilitate the reaching of agreement between NPAS, the police counter-terrorism network and the Metropolitan Police Service on how security, counter-terrorism and armed policing deployments will be differentiated, to facilitate appropriate sharing of the full costs of NPAS services.
15. From 2018/19 onwards, for financial purposes, the National Strategic Board should treat the police counter-terrorism network as though it were a police force, and should recover all relevant revenue and capital costs for support provided to that network. The cost of counter-terrorism tasks undertaken in support of force-commanded operations, however, should normally be met by forces.

¹⁶⁹ In practice, the difficulty of allocating costs related to security and counter-terrorism operations has only had financial significance to date for the Metropolitan Police Service, and we therefore propose in Recommendation 15 that agreement should be reached with that force only. Relevant NPCC portfolio leads should be involved as necessary, however, so that the agreement may be applied to all forces.

Future options

Judgment

- The lack of an up-to-date strategy for police air support, the apparent inconsistency in force tasking of air support, the lower than expected levels of support provided by NPAS, the challenges around NPAS financing, and weaknesses in governance lead us to conclude that police leaders urgently need to reconsider the arrangements for police air support.

Findings

To consider how police air support might best be delivered in future, we sought to understand the impact of drone technology, the opportunities for co-operation with non-police organisations, the potential for private sector involvement, and alternative structures for police collaboration.

Drone technology

For some assignments, an alternative to the use of manned aircraft is the use of drones with video capabilities. NPAS does not currently operate any drones, but its senior managers told us they were seeking funding in 2017/18 from the Police Transformation Fund¹⁷⁰ for two pieces of work: one concerning governance and oversight of police use of drones, and one involving the operation by NPAS of a helicopter and large drones for coastal surveillance duties.

If a police force wishes to operate a miniature or small drone¹⁷¹ in a congested area,¹⁷² as is likely to be the case for many policing purposes, it is necessary to obtain a 'Permission' issued by the CAA. When regular drone use is intended, the CAA will normally require that an operating manual be produced and that drone operators pass an assessment of competence. The flying of drones is subject to a

¹⁷⁰ The Home Secretary allocates the Police Transformation Fund taking account of recommendations from the Police Reform and Transformation Board. For further details, see: www.npcc.police.uk/NPCCBusinessAreas/ReformandTransformation/PoliceReformandTransformationBoard.aspx

¹⁷¹ Drones may be categorised according to their weight: 'miniature' means a weight of less than 1kg, while 'small' means between 1kg and 20kg. For further details, see: www.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment_data/file/579562/consultation-on-the-safe-use-of-drones.pdf

¹⁷² Defined as 'any area of a city, town or settlement which is substantially used for residential, industrial, commercial or recreational purposes'. See: www.caa.co.uk/Commercial-industry/Aircraft/Unmanned-aircraft/Guidance-on-operating-permissions-for-drones/

number of safety and privacy rules, a principal requirement being that a drone must remain within sight of the operator while deployed. The government is currently considering options for promoting the introduction of drones that would fly Beyond Visual Line Of Sight (BVLOS).¹⁷³

When we surveyed forces in March 2017, we found that 28 of the 43 forces in England and Wales had either purchased at least one drone or had ready access to one, normally through collaboration with other forces but, in four cases, through collaboration with fire and rescue services. A further nine forces were actively considering purchase or other arrangements for access, leaving only six forces that had not formally considered drone use. Of the forces that were using drones, most had purchased two or three, although the Metropolitan Police Service had 12. The cost of individual drones ranged from about £1,450 (one drone purchased by Durham Constabulary) to £60,000 (£300,000 for five drones purchased with Home Office funding by Surrey Police and Sussex Police).

When we visited forces, officers told us that drones had generally been purchased with a view to establishing their capabilities and cost-effectiveness as an alternative to calling for NPAS support. Although we spoke to officers from 32 forces in total, we did not find any force able to produce analysis comparing the efficiency or effectiveness of drones with use of NPAS services.¹⁷⁴ Most officers did claim that drone use was cost-effective, however, with one force estimating that their need for NPAS support might be halved now that they had drones that they could deploy instead. Other forces reported mixed views, with some reporting that they had reduced their demand on NPAS but others had not, because they had used their drones to obtain aerial imagery that they would not have expected to obtain via NPAS (either because it was for a crime regarded by NPAS as being of lower priority or because NPAS support was not readily available to their force).

We discussed with officers whether they thought drones should be operated by forces or NPAS. Even with forces that were content with the service they received from NPAS, there were strong views that drones should be operated by forces directly.

One assessment shared with us concerning the Sussex Police trial of drones had concluded that the purchase and set-up costs had far outweighed the benefits gained through operational use of the drones (although it should be noted that the drones in this case cost £60,000 each).¹⁷⁵ However, officers and staff believed that

¹⁷³ For further details, see: www.gov.uk/government/consultations/benefits-of-drones-to-the-uk-economy

¹⁷⁴ In a few cases, this was because the force was still trialling the use of drones, but, overall, we were surprised to find little evidence of analysis of the comparative costs and benefits of drone use.

¹⁷⁵ *Final Project Report: Quantifying the opportunities and threats of Unmanned Aerial Vehicle (UAV) technology in Policing*, NPCC, December 2016, unpublished.

drones could be used to support them in delivering a policing service, to make their jobs safer and to help maximise public safety. The project concluded that drones were not an alternative to the service provided by NPAS, but rather an additional tool for use alongside helicopters and as a sole form of air support only in limited circumstances. The project did not assess the relative cost efficiency of helicopter and drone deployments for the same task, but it did identify the potential for savings if drones were used in place of helicopters for a proportion of certain kinds of task.

Officers from almost every force commented on the lack of readily available guidance on the procurement and use of drones, and it appeared from the differing practices regarding insurance that public money could be spent more wisely. For example, some forces had not taken out any additional insurance, while one force had paid £4,500 to insure two drones, and another force operating very similar drones had paid £1,400 to insure five of them.¹⁷⁶

It is not clear how much of the air support provided by NPAS in recent years can now be undertaken more efficiently by forces using drones.¹⁷⁷ This is particularly true because a drone could be deployed in circumstances in which use of a manned aircraft would be far more effective; comparisons of efficiency require more than simple consideration of cost. It is even less clear what the position will be if government policy and technological developments facilitate police use of light or large drones in the future.¹⁷⁸ This matter has been examined to some degree by the Bluelight Air Support Programme (BASP) through a proof of concept study conducted in 2016/17 and supported by the Police Innovation Fund.

This study examined NPAS performance data for one region of England and Wales and modelled performance figures based on the addition of 30 light BVLOS drones to the national fleet.¹⁷⁹ It was calculated that the 30 drones would increase overall aerial imagery capacity by about one-fifth for the equivalent of the capital cost of one helicopter, although NPAS subsequently told us that they did not believe the modelling adequately reflected operational reality. It was also unclear to us whether staffing costs had been considered (i.e. 30 drones would mean at least 30 operators plus other staff in support, and many more than this if more than one shift a day was to be staffed).

¹⁷⁶ Insurance might cover public liabilities such as injury to a person or damage to property struck by a drone, or force liabilities such as repair or replacement of a drone after an accident.

¹⁷⁷ Research need not necessarily be undertaken by the police service. See www.searchresearch.org.uk/downloads/papers/178827540559bf5468e5099.pdf for details of recent comparison of the use of manned and unmanned aircraft over Northumberland.

¹⁷⁸ Drones that weigh more than 20kg and 150kg respectively.

¹⁷⁹ This study was a proof of concept only; BVLOS drones are not currently approved for police use in the United Kingdom.

Co-operation with non-police organisations

The BASP study did not limit itself to the addition of BVLOS drones to the manned aircraft fleet but also explored the potential for collaboration between the police service and other public sector organisations, such as the fire and rescue services, Border Force, Immigration Enforcement and NHS England.

There are 48 fire and rescue services in England and Wales, none of which operates aircraft (although some operate drones). Some of these drones have been obtained on a collaborative basis with police forces, while others have been made available to a police force even though they belong to the fire and rescue service. Current fire and rescue service use of drones is primarily for aerial surveillance, for example to monitor how fire is spreading through a building. Although there has been some consideration (through BASP) of the rapid transportation of officers and equipment across the country by helicopter, no fire and rescue service has yet adopted this model, primarily on grounds of cost. By its very nature, fire and rescue service demand is usually reactive in nature.

Border Force currently has no dedicated air support capability but buys in air support from other public sector organisations. The organisation does not currently operate drones but may do so in future. Until 2016, however, Border Force had a contract with a commercial supplier to meet its air support needs. These are quite different from those of police forces, because much of the time there is a need for surveillance over open sea, as far as 250 miles from the UK coastline.

Immigration Enforcement also has no dedicated air support capability, and has not used a great deal of air support in recent years. The organisation does not currently operate drones but may do so in future. When a need has arisen for air support, Immigration Enforcement investigators have usually been able to secure the necessary support from NPAS through a local police force. Most of Immigration Enforcement's operational activity is centred over land rather than sea.

Air ambulances are provided by charitable trusts, each of which operates independently. They are allocated tasks by the statutory ambulance services across England and Wales, with the National Ambulance Resilience Unit providing co-ordination in the event of a declared major incident. There are currently 23 air ambulances in operation. The charitable status of their operation means that the potential for collaboration is limited, although collaboration on non-operational issues such as maintenance and procurement might be possible.

Private sector involvement

BASP also considered the potential involvement of private sector partners in delivering air support services, although the proof of concept project did not come to any conclusion on the most appropriate balance of private sector involvement. The 2009 review of the police air support strategy had noted that bringing maintenance

in-house for three forces from 2007 was expected to generate savings of 32 percent over five years.¹⁸⁰ NPAS obtains its maintenance from a private contractor. The 2009 review also noted that most police forces had chosen to own rather than lease aircraft, and concluded that this was likely to be the most cost-effective model, although since that time, other government departments have chosen to involve private contractors in air support to a greater degree.¹⁸¹

Conclusions and recommendations

Drone technology

Most forces have invested in miniature and small drones, and all of those that had done so reported favourably on their use.¹⁸² However, many forces also told us that they had found it difficult to obtain clear guidance about drones from expert sources, and those forces that had purchased drones had all done so without the potential benefit of reduced purchase pricing through a single procurement process.

It appears to us that reasons for the lack of readily available guidance might include the fact that the NPCC communication channels concerning drones are less effective than they need to be, and that the absence of rigorous evaluation by any force of their use of drones might have inhibited the production of useful guidance.

It seems clear that the direct costs of operating a miniature or small drone will always be lower than those of operating a helicopter, although it should be recognised that drone operation also requires a ‘crew’ of at least two people, and so costs will not be negligible. Cost is only one factor to consider when choosing between different types of air support for any given task. For example, the sensors that can be carried by small drones are considerably less capable than those that can be carried by a helicopter. Additional considerations will arise when BVLOS drones become available, although it may be some years before these are authorised for use over populated areas.

Overall, we believe that a proportion of the air support that has been provided by NPAS in recent years could now be undertaken more efficiently by forces themselves, if they have invested in the training of their officers and the procurement of drones (or can access drone services in some other way). How sizeable that proportion is, however, remains to be seen.

¹⁸⁰ This refers to the creation of the Eastern Counties Police Maintenance organisation, serving Cambridgeshire Constabulary, Essex Police and Suffolk Constabulary.

¹⁸¹ For example, the Maritime and Coastguard Agency awarded the UK search and rescue contract for 2015–26 to Bristow Helicopters.

¹⁸² Although as noted earlier, Sussex Police did not believe the operational benefits obtained had justified the set-up costs.

We considered whether drones should be operated by forces or NPAS. The officers we met expressed strong views in favour of local ownership, because the need to transport drones to the area of flight requires local infrastructure, which forces can readily provide but which NPAS could not without a significant increase in resourcing. Furthermore, because of their portable nature and the fact that a drone operator can undertake other duties while waiting for a request for service (which a helicopter pilot and crew cannot realistically do), it is likely to be more financially efficient for forces to operate smaller drones.

We therefore believe that smaller drones should continue to be operated by forces rather than NPAS. But national operation of drones is likely to be more efficient in two circumstances. Firstly, when a drone is so specialised or expensive that it is deployed very infrequently, in which case central provision and possibly centralised operation might be appropriate. Secondly, should BVLOS drones be authorised for police use, because these can be deployed remotely and their capabilities are likely to be nearer those of a manned aircraft, we believe that their operation by NPAS would be sensible. Different options for the operation of such drones should be assessed once they become available, and the possibility of operation by both NPAS and a small number of forces should not be discounted (e.g. if the drones were generally deployed in only a limited number of force areas).

Co-operation with non-police organisations

Chief constables and local policing bodies are under statutory duties to keep the potential gains through collaboration under consideration,¹⁸³ with specific duties applying in England to consider collaboration with other emergency services.¹⁸⁴

Both the BASP study and the National Strategic Board agree that the potential for collaboration with non-police organisations should be explored. However, they differ in one important aspect: the BASP study was produced with a working assumption of a ‘flight provider’ (which could be NPAS, although it could equally be a commercial supplier),¹⁸⁵ whereas the National Strategic Board believes that risks are minimised if NPAS as an organisation is the subject of further evolution. We believe that the police service now needs to concentrate on areas of agreement rather than disagreement, and work out the best way to assess the benefits and risks of collaborating with other public bodies, allowing for different ways in which that collaboration might take place.

¹⁸³ See sections 22B and 22C of the Police Act 1996 as amended by the Police Reform and Social Responsibility Act 2011. Available at: www.legislation.gov.uk/ukpga/2011/13/section/89

¹⁸⁴ See section 2 of the Policing and Crime Act 2017. Available at: www.legislation.gov.uk/ukpga/2017/3/section/2/enacted

¹⁸⁵ A flight provider could also be a joint venture between the public and private sectors; see Joint Ventures: a guidance note for public sector bodies forming joint ventures with the private sector, HM Treasury, March 2010.

NPAS was formed partly because of the efficiency savings that could be achieved through borderless deployment of aircraft.¹⁸⁶ Given that other emergency services generally do not operate aircraft at present, we do not see a likelihood of significant efficiency savings arising for the police service through collaboration with other services. We accept that there could be some efficiency gains, especially for non-police organisations, and additionally some operational benefits, although the costs associated with the management of change must be taken into account.

Private sector involvement

It is right to consider every reasonable possibility for improving the effectiveness and efficiency of air support, including different public and private sector options for ownership and operation of air support assets.¹⁸⁷ Furthermore, the Chief Constables' Council agreed in 2010 that consideration would be given to the involvement of commercial partners in the provision of air support, once a national service had created a more efficient operating model. Now that seven years have passed, it is the right time to return to this issue.

Alternative structures for police collaboration

NPAS was created as a collaboration between police forces, and uses a lead organisation model.¹⁸⁸ This is not the only way that forces can choose to collaborate.¹⁸⁹

The work recently completed by the NPCC Specialist Capabilities Programme has suggested that future collaborations on specialist policing areas should take place using a model of 'networked policing'.¹⁹⁰ Networked policing is described as "a rebalancing of the relationship between territorial policing and the delivery of specialist capability that aims to retain the best of the local model (which remains the bedrock of the British policing model), while providing an agile response to new and existing threats."¹⁹¹ Using this model, specialist capabilities would be provided on the

¹⁸⁶ Before NPAS was created, forces would normally deploy only their own aircraft to incidents within their force area. For example, a Metropolitan Police Service helicopter would attend incidents in south-west London, even though the Surrey Police helicopter might have been nearer.

¹⁸⁷ Although the requirements of the CAA, including those related to the responsibilities of the Accountable Manager, would still need to be met.

¹⁸⁸ As is the case with other police collaborations; for example, with the Regional Organised Crime Units in the south east of England and for the Yorkshire and Humber region.

¹⁸⁹ For example, seven different options for collaboration and a non-collaborative model for national operation are set out in *The governance of supra-force specialist policing capabilities: a review by the Police Foundation*, December 2016, Police Foundation, pages 50–52.

¹⁹⁰ *The Specialist Capabilities Programme – Phase One Report*, NPCC, October 2016.

¹⁹¹ *Ibid.*, page 8.

basis of sound data, a 'mutual mindset' addressing governance and economic arrangements, and 'capability leadership' by dedicated senior officers. It seems to us, therefore, that there are a number of options for collaboration on air support between forces that could be viable alternatives to the current lead local policing body model.

Having addressed in this report the strategic leadership and operational management of air support, the service provided by NPAS and how it is funded, and specialist user requirements, we now wish to set out what we see as the main options for the future.

We have judged that the police service does not have an up-to-date strategy for air support. We have also judged that the police service needs to develop a common understanding of the demand for air support and its contribution to force effectiveness. Only when an updated strategy, a comprehensive assessment of demand, and agreement on the professional use of air support are available can informed decisions be made about how police air support can be provided effectively and efficiently.

The operation of NPAS quite naturally flows from the collaboration agreement that created it. We found that there are problems with several aspects of NPAS, all of which are related to the content of the collaboration agreement. There were clearly problems with the governance of NPAS, and many senior officers expressed limited confidence in their ability to influence its future direction.

Although we found NPAS was delivering exactly the levels of performance required by the collaboration agreement, we were surprised to find the level of service provided to some forces to be as low as it was. This is not because we expected to find any particular level of service but simply because we believe it difficult to consider NPAS to be providing a truly national service when the experience of frontline officers across different forces varies so much.

We also judge that NPAS is at a critical point financially. We have concluded that there is no clear evidence that current arrangements are any more or less efficient financially than they were when forces managed their own air support. The decisions that have been made since the principles of the collaboration were first agreed are tending to push the fixed as well as the variable costs of NPAS onto a limited number of forces, and it appears that planning to date has under-estimated the costs of refreshing the smaller fleet of aircraft now in operation. Yet forces have limited ability to withdraw from the collaboration other than by choosing not to request air support, which only increases the costs for the forces that continue to use NPAS services.

We have considered the potential for greater use of drones, for collaboration with non-police organisations, and, to a very limited extent, for greater involvement of the private sector. All of these offer opportunities to improve the efficiency or

effectiveness of police air support, but none offers guaranteed improvements, and with the exception of the use of miniature and small drones (which are readily available now), time would be needed to develop these options further.

Despite our findings, we believe that a single collaboration across England and Wales could be an efficient and effective way of providing police air support. The nature and extent of that collaboration, however, needs further consideration. It makes sense to seek efficiency savings through centralised procurement of essentials such as aircraft, fuel and insurance. But we do not believe that a national approach necessarily requires collaboration in the current form of NPAS. Each of the component parts of air support should be considered individually (procurement, maintenance, aircraft despatch, training, and so on) and then a range of alternatives for providing those components should be assessed, taking account of the requirements of the CAA, the range of options identified by the NPCC work on specialist capabilities, and different ways of combining those component parts into a working system.

As a single collaboration naturally requires a collaboration agreement, we therefore see two main options for making progress. The first option is to revise the existing collaboration agreement to improve its content about, for example, governance, performance requirements and financial arrangements. We acknowledge this will be challenging, but the National Strategic Board commenced an initial review of the collaboration agreement in September 2016, so work is already under way.

We have three main concerns with this approach, however. Firstly, revising the existing collaboration agreement requires continuation of a lead local policing body model. While we do not discount further use of that model, we believe that before deciding to continue with it, chief officers and local policing bodies should at least consider the alternatives.

Our second concern is that the current collaboration agreement does not allow forces to withdraw from the collaboration. Even if they make no use of NPAS services, they still effectively make a capital contribution to NPAS each year (because the NPAS capital allocation reduces the amount of capital available for subsequent division between the 43 forces in England and Wales). There are some chief officers who have made it clear to us that, given the choice, they would withdraw from NPAS. They cannot, because the Home Secretary's Order precludes them from obtaining air support services from another provider. While we accept that this part of the collaboration agreement could be revised, we believe that the varied requirements of forces – and the discretion that should be afforded to local policing bodies – mean that a more flexible model is required. We believe that a national service should, as far as is practicable, provide each force with a bespoke service that has been agreed with its leaders and that may be periodically adjusted, rather

than provide a single level of service that represents the best compromise that can be reached between forces with very different needs. We believe this would be very difficult to achieve by revision of the existing collaboration agreement.

Our third concern is a more pragmatic one. We have found widespread problems with the collaboration agreement. Some of its most basic terms, such as key objectives for NPAS and the service level agreement, no longer seem to be appropriate, or are no longer valid, such as the schedules on flying hours and financial contributions. The collaboration agreement consists of over 131 pages and includes 11 schedules, with some of those schedules having their own appendices. It is all based largely on work that was undertaken between 2008 and 2010, rather than on current thinking on the efficient and effective provision of specialist capabilities. We believe it would be better to start again with a fresh sheet of paper than attempt to re-draft the existing complex document.

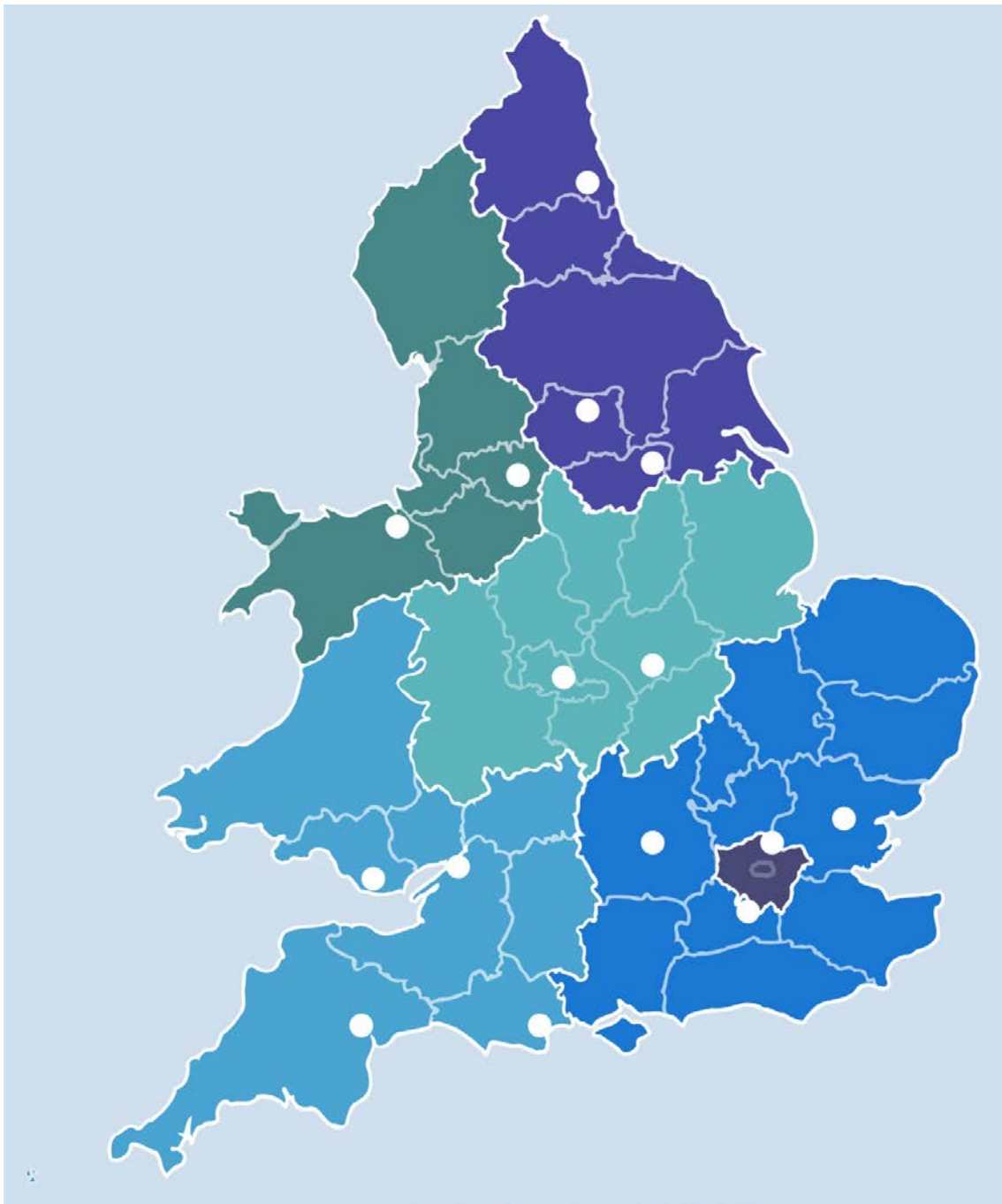
We believe therefore that an alternative approach to making progress is preferable. Rather than revise the existing collaboration agreement, the necessary time should be taken to develop a new one, and the existing one should then be terminated with appropriate transfer arrangements being made to ensure continuous air support. The necessary work could be undertaken through the NPCC Specialist Capabilities Programme, and it should be started as soon as practicable so that the new collaboration agreement would come into effect within no more than three years.

We therefore make the following recommendations:

Recommendations

16. Chief officers and local policing bodies should urgently consider options for revising or replacing the existing NPAS collaboration agreement, if necessary commissioning scoping work through the NPCC Specialist Capabilities Programme before agreeing how to proceed. Regardless of the form in which the collaboration is to exist in future, the intention should be to take account of the building-block pieces of work we have recommended and to have improved arrangements in place within no more than three years.
17. As soon as practicable, the NPCC lead for air support should commission an evaluation of the cost-effectiveness of police use of miniature and small drones, drawing on advice from the College of Policing and working with any other partners considered appropriate. This evaluation should produce an evidence base to inform subsequent guidance and decision making.
18. By December 2018, the NPCC lead for air support should design a methodology that can be used at force, regional and national levels to assess the benefits and risks of collaboration on air support with other emergency services and public bodies such as Border Force and Immigration Enforcement, including collaboration on the use of drones.
19. The NPCC Specialist Capabilities Programme should co-ordinate activity so that, by March 2019, chief constables for all 44 forces contributing to NPAS are able to publish in a consistent format a detailed description of the air support each force requires.

Appendix A – a map of NPAS bases and regions



Key



North west region



North east region



Central region



NPAS bases



South west region



South east region



London region

Appendix B – a history of police air support

Although police forces were making limited use of air support in the 1920s and 1930s, after repeated trials in the post-war years, significant use of police aviation began in 1973 with the purchase of three helicopters by the Metropolitan Police. By 1993, there were 16 full-time air support units in England and Wales, with one collaborated unit being operated by West Mercia Constabulary and Staffordshire Constabulary and the remaining units being operated by single forces. At that time, Hampshire Constabulary was the only force in England and Wales operating a fixed-wing aircraft, with the remainder using helicopters.

In 1993, the Association of Chief Police Officers (ACPO) and the Association of County Councils developed a new police air support strategy. This strategy was intended to allow more forces to take advantage of air support by encouraging collaboration between smaller forces. Limited capital funding for the next few years had been secured by the Home Office and was to be prioritised towards such collaboration.

In 1997, Her Majesty's Inspectorate of Constabulary (HMIC) published a guide to good practice within police air support units. This guide collated the good practice identified by HMIC during a series of inspections of police air support units, which had followed the introduction of the Police Air Operator's Certificate. Areas of good practice identified that are of relevance to this study include financial planning for aircraft replacement, implementing a system for assessing demand, and developing and publishing appropriate performance indicators.

That same year, the Home Office issued guidance on future allocation of capital funding, which would give priority to bids made on a collaborative basis from forces that did not yet have air support. In the following years, a number of new collaborated air support units were created, so that by 2009, police forces in England and Wales were operating 33 aircraft through 31 air support units, providing a service to 39 forces. Only the forces for Cumbria, North Yorkshire, Lincolnshire and Kent were without dedicated air support, these forces having apparently decided that it was uneconomical to provide it even through collaboration with surrounding forces (although at least Kent Police did 'buy in' some air support from a neighbouring force).

In 2009, Chief Constable Bernard Hogan-Howe QPM¹⁹² of Merseyside Police (at that time the ACPO lead for air support) reported the results of a comprehensive review of the 1993 police air support strategy. The review was intended to provide a framework for optimum delivery of police air support over the next ten years and

¹⁹² Now Lord Hogan-Howe QPM.

included assessment of the existing 31 air support units. It found considerable variation, with 26 forces owning their aircraft but five leasing aircraft from specialist suppliers, and differing approaches to maintenance, performance measurement and operations. Where forces purchased aircraft, the Home Office usually met 40 percent of the capital cost, leaving forces to pay the remainder. Overall, the review drew a number of conclusions, including the following:

- There was some excess capacity within the existing fleet of 33 aircraft, notably in the north west and south east of England.
- A move from a large number of collaborated air support units to a single national police air service would be more effective and efficient.
- Implementation of a national police air service should proceed on a phased basis, not least to ensure minimal impact in London before the 2012 Olympics.
- Plans should proceed on the basis that the police service was either getting better performance for the same cost, or the same performance for a lower cost, and that current air support response times and capacity should be maintained.
- In-house maintenance and direct employment rather than contracting-in of pilots were considered likely to offer significant financial savings, and leasing aircraft was assessed as likely to cost considerably more than ownership.
- Replacement of aircraft after 15 years rather than every 10 years would provide further savings, although this would only be practical if equipment was upgraded mid-way through the 15-year period.
- Because of successful use of drones by the military and anticipated technological developments, the national police air service should take responsibility for police use of drones as well as manned aircraft.
- While air support for general policing purposes was often best undertaken using helicopters, there was a role for fixed-wing aircraft and these should form part of the fleet, including to support anticipated demand from regional counter-terrorism and organised crime units.

The review concluded with a recommendation for an imminent reduction in the fleet to 29 aircraft and a move in the longer term to a fleet of 23 helicopters and three fixed-wing aircraft. It was estimated that the annual revenue cost of £45m would be reduced by £7.5m in the short term, although with one-off costs of £1.5m necessary for managing the transition. Reduction in the longer term to 26 aircraft was estimated to generate a further £2.7m of savings annually, with additional and proportionate savings in capital spending.

As a result of that review, in October 2010 a paper was presented to the Chief Constables' Council containing a formal proposal for the creation of a national police air service. This made recommendations that were similar but not identical to those contained within the 2009 report of the review. The main differences were that the paper did not give the national service responsibility for drones but proposed that this should be kept under review, and that options for involving commercial partners would be explored once the national service had created a more efficient operating model.

The proposal outlined a number of options, including a 'minimum change model' that would provide efficiency savings of 6.5 percent achieved through borderless tasking and more efficient procurement, and further reduce costs by cutting the fleet to 28 aircraft: in other words, broadly what had been recommended as a first stage by the 2009 review. The recommended option, however, was for further reduction in capacity, with a fleet of 26 helicopters (including three 'spare' aircraft, to substitute for those undergoing maintenance) operating from 20 bases, at an annual revenue and capital cost of £51.6m. No fixed-wing provision was intended, nor was there any provision for transitional costs. It was anticipated that the national service would be hosted by the National Policing Improvement Agency and when the recommendation was approved by chief constables, staff from this organisation further developed the proposal under the leadership of Alex Marshall QPM, then the chief constable of Hampshire Constabulary and the police lead for air support.

In January 2012, the government announced that part of the police capital grant allocation would be used to support the capital requirements of the National Police Air Service (NPAS). This meant that all 43 forces in England and Wales would have their annual capital allocations reduced by an amount in proportion to their share of the total annual grant, in order to permit an annual capital grant to NPAS.

In June 2012, the Home Secretary exercised powers under the Police Act 1996 to issue an Order requiring forces in England and Wales to obtain air support through a single collaboration agreement. This meant that forces that wished to use air support were required to do so through a single collaboration agreement, but the terms of that collaboration agreement were for the police service and policing bodies to decide, and forces were not required to participate in the collaboration if they decided they had no need for air support (although their annual capital allocation would still be proportionately reduced). In fact, all 43 territorial forces in England and Wales went on to sign up to the collaboration agreement, as did, additionally, British Transport Police.

NPAS was formally launched in October 2012. By that time, however, the government had announced that the National Policing Improvement Agency was to be dissolved, and so different hosting arrangements for the national service had been designed. These involved one local policing body acting as the lead local policing body for the national service, with the West Yorkshire PCC volunteering to

do so. Arrangements were formalised through a collaboration agreement made under the Police Act 1996, which permitted police forces and policing bodies to enter into collaborative arrangements in the interests of efficiency and effectiveness.

NPAS has developed since 2012 according to a programme of change consisting of three phases. The first phase lasted until September 2016 and involved incorporation of the existing force air support units into NPAS. Although the original plan had been to operate 23 helicopters (plus three 'spares') from 20 bases, by early 2016 NPAS had aircraft based at only 17 bases, with a new base at Doncaster being developed. Phase two overlapped phase one, having commenced in 2014 and having led to a decision by the National Strategic Board in January 2015 to reduce revenue costs by a further 14 percent. This was to be achieved through reduction in the fleet from 26 helicopters (including the three 'spares') operating from 17 bases, to 19 helicopters (including four 'spares') and four fixed-wing aircraft (of which one would be a 'spare'), operating from 15 bases. By April 2017, NPAS had reduced the helicopter fleet and number of bases to achieve these aims, and was awaiting delivery of the four fixed-wing aircraft from summer 2017 (with these due to become operational during 2018).

The third phase of the NPAS programme of change concerns determination of a new operating model and governance structure to take NPAS forward from 2017/18.