

Leading Beyond Tenure. Extending the Police Leadership Commission through a Custodial Model of Strategic Police Leadership

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Abstract

The report of the Police Leadership Commission, published in July 2026, is the most comprehensive examination of police leadership in England and Wales in a generation. Its recommendations propose far-reaching reform of how police leaders are attracted, developed, promoted and supported. This paper welcomes those reforms but identifies a conceptual gap beneath them. The Commission assigns stewardship of the future almost entirely to the system, through a proposed national academy, pipelines and talent schemes, whilst the individual chief officer's accountability for the condition of the institution they hand on remains untheorised and unmeasured. Adapting stewardship theory to the distinctive governance conditions of policing, the paper argues that the accountability environment surrounding chief officers systematically converts would-be stewards into performance agents. It develops a Custodial Strategic Leadership Framework and four formal propositions specifying when chief officer attention will shift from capability building to performance signalling, and the conditions under which custodial leadership becomes possible. The paper then applies the framework to the Commission's recommendations, proposes how leadership legacy could be assessed alongside conventional performance measures, and sets out a research agenda.

Keywords: *Police leadership, Stewardship theory, Chief officers, Institutional capability, Police governance*

Introduction

The Police Leadership Commission published its report, *Professionalism and Performance*, on 6 July 2026. It is the most comprehensive examination of police leadership in England and Wales in a generation. Established in October 2025 by the College of Policing with the support of the Home Office, and co-chaired by Lord Blunkett and Lord Herbert, the Commission drew on evidence from thousands of officers, staff and members of the public across force visits, surveys, roundtables and a national call for evidence. Its conclusion is candid. The systems intended to produce good police leadership are fragmented, inconsistent and too often unfair, and the overall quality of leadership does not consistently provide the policing that the public deserves ([Police Leadership Commission, 2026](#)).

The Commission's 27 recommendations amount to the most ambitious redesign of police leadership development in modern times. They include a National Academy of Police Leadership to act as system owner for leadership across the service, a police leadership fast stream intended to recruit at least 400 entrants a year, a targeted direct entry scheme drawing proven leaders from adjacent professions, reform of promotion to sergeant and inspector, a professional digital passport for every member of the police workforce, an annual performance review for all chief officers including chief constables, and a potential route towards a licence to practise. This paper welcomes these proposals. It does not seek to relitigate them. Its purpose is to identify and address a conceptual gap that sits beneath them.

That gap concerns where responsibility for the long term is located. The Commission is far from indifferent to the future. Its proposed academy, its pipelines and its talent schemes are all instruments of long-horizon capability building. Yet in the Commission's architecture, stewardship of the future is assigned almost entirely to the system. It belongs to the College, to the new National Police Service and to the proposed academy. The individual chief officer, by contrast, appears in the report primarily as an object of development and a subject of performance assessment. What remains untheorised is the chief officer's own accountability for the condition of the institution they hand on. No recommendation asks whether a force is more capable, more resilient and better prepared when a chief constable leaves than when they arrived, and no mechanism exists through which that question could be answered.

The Commission's own evidence illustrates the cost of this silence. Central spending on leadership development stands at roughly 0.02 per cent of total police funding, around four million pounds a year. Fifteen years after commissioning, an army colonel leading 1,500 people will typically have completed 72 weeks of leadership development, whilst a chief superintendent in the Metropolitan Police with comparable progression is likely to have had two or three weeks. More than three-quarters of sergeants surveyed by the Commission had acted up before substantive promotion, over half for thirteen months or longer, and more than a fifth of new sergeants and inspectors reported receiving no formal leadership training more than two years into the role ([Police Leadership Commission, 2026](#)). These figures are usually read as evidence of underinvestment by government. This paper reads them differently. They are what an accountability system looks like when nobody at the level of the individual force is answerable for institutional capability over time. They are under custodianship expressed in numbers.

An obvious objection should be met immediately. Chief constables in England and Wales already produce Force Management Statements, an annual self-assessment of future demand, workforce condition and capability gaps required by His Majesty's Inspectorate of Constabulary and Fire and Rescue Services ([HMICFRS, 2024](#)). If custodial accountability already exists in reporting form, what is missing? The answer developed in this paper is that Force Management Statements generate information without consequence. They are connected to no appointment decision, no appraisal outcome, no form of professional recognition, and a reporting duty that carries no consequence architecture produces compliance rather than custodianship. Far from undermining the argument, the Force Management Statement demonstrates it. Policing has already accepted that capability over time should be described. It has not yet accepted that anyone should be judged on it.

The paper proceeds as a conceptual contribution, and it is worth being explicit about the kind of conceptual work involved. In [Jaakkola's \(2020\)](#) terms, this is theory adaptation. Stewardship theory was developed in corporate governance to explain managers who are intrinsically motivated to serve the institution rather than their own interests ([Donaldson and Davis, 1991](#); [Davis, Schoorman and Donaldson, 1997](#)). Its central proposition, that good leadership leaves the organisation better than it was found, is precisely the intuition this paper pursues. But the theory travels badly into

policing without adaptation, because the conditions it assumes do not hold. Chief officers serve fixed and relatively short tenures. Their principals are political and changeable. Their accountability runs through inspection gradings, elected commissioners and national performance expectations rather than through any enduring stake in organisational success. The interesting theoretical question is therefore not whether police leaders can be stewards. Many plainly wish to be. It is what happens to stewardship when it is placed inside a governance architecture that systematically rewards agent-like behaviour.

The central claim of the paper is that the governance environment of policing converts would-be stewards into performance agents. This is not a claim about character. It is a claim about incentives, horizons and the absence of any mechanism through which custodial behaviour is observed, valued or remembered. Section 2 sets out the strategic context that makes this problem pressing. Section 3 examines the incentive structure that draws chief officer attention towards the short term. Section 4 locates the conceptual gap within the leadership, policing and stewardship literatures. Section 5 presents the Custodial Strategic Leadership Framework and four formal propositions. Section 6 applies the framework to the Commission's recommendations, Section 7 proposes how leadership legacy could be assessed and sets out a research agenda, and Section 8 concludes.

The Strategic Context of Contemporary Police Leadership

The case for rethinking the purpose of chief officer leadership rests on the environment in which forces now operate. Policing in England and Wales faces sustained fiscal constraint, a workforce reshaped by rapid recruitment and consequent inexperience at almost every rank, accelerating technological change including artificial intelligence, sustained growth in cyber-enabled and online-facilitated crime, rising demand associated with vulnerability and safeguarding, and the most significant structural reform in fifty years in the creation of a National Police Service. Much of this diagnosis predates the Commission, having been set out at length in the Strategic Review of Policing ([Police Foundation, 2022](#)) and in successive annual assessments by the inspectorate ([HMICFRS, 2025](#)). Public confidence has weakened alongside these pressures. The proportion of the public rating their local police as doing a good or excellent job stood at 49 per cent in the year to March 2025, down from 62 per cent

a decade earlier, and polling cited by the Commission suggests the public trusts senior police leaders less than it trusts frontline officers ([Police Leadership Commission, 2026](#)).

Two features of this environment matter for the argument that follows. The first is uncertainty. The demand profile a force will face in ten years cannot be confidently predicted, which makes adaptability a capability in its own right rather than a by-product of good current performance. The second is the length of capability cycles. The assets that determine whether a force can meet future demand, including its leadership pipeline, its investigative capacity, its digital infrastructure and its culture, take years and sometimes more than a decade to build, and can be quietly depleted for years before the damage becomes visible in performance data. An organisation can therefore perform well today whilst becoming steadily less prepared for tomorrow, and nothing in the current assessment of forces or their leaders would detect the difference. It is this possibility, of performance and preparedness moving in opposite directions, that a purely performance-centred conception of chief officer leadership cannot address.

The leadership dimension of this context is itself part of the problem. Since 2018 the Independent Office for Police Conduct has received 107 referrals involving chief officers, leading to 78 investigations, with recurring themes including cronyism, nepotism, abuse of position and corruption ([Police Leadership Commission, 2026](#)). These cases matter for the present argument in two ways. They corrode public confidence in a manner no operational success can quickly repair, and they represent custodial failure in its starkest form, since a leader who damages the legitimacy of their force bequeaths a deficit that successors spend years discharging. A conception of chief officer success confined to within tenure performance has no vocabulary for this kind of harm, which is precisely why a custodial vocabulary is needed.

Why Short-Term Performance Dominates

It would be easy to attribute short-termism in police leadership to individual failing, and some public commentary does. The argument of this section is different. Chief officers attend to the short term because the governance environment surrounding them makes that the rational, and in some respects the only defensible,

allocation of attention. The problem is structural, and it must be understood structurally before it can be repaired.

Chief officers in England and Wales operate within an accountability lattice of unusual density. They answer to an elected Police and Crime Commissioner or mayor whose own horizon is set by a four-year electoral cycle, an arrangement whose implications for chief constable independence and security of tenure are well documented ([Lister, 2013](#)). They are inspected and publicly graded by HMICFRS. They are subject to Home Office performance expectations and national priorities that shift with governments and Home Secretaries. They manage annual budget settlements that reward in-year efficiency. They are exposed to continuous media scrutiny in which a single operational failure can define a tenure. Each element of this lattice is individually defensible. Taken together, they share a common property. Almost everything they observe, grade and reward is visible within a single chief officer's tenure, and almost nothing they observe concerns the slow accumulation or erosion of institutional capability. This is precisely the environment that scholarship on target regimes in public services would predict to distort behaviour, since what is measured becomes what matters and what is unmeasured quietly ceases to ([Bevan and Hood, 2006](#)).

The temporal arithmetic compounds the problem. Chief constable tenure typically runs to around four or five years ([Caless, 2011](#)), whilst the investment cycles of the capabilities that matter most run considerably longer. A leadership pipeline from sergeant to superintendent takes a decade to mature. Investigative capability, digital infrastructure and organisational culture move on similar timescales. The benefits of investing in them therefore accrue largely to a successor, whilst the costs, in money, in leadership attention and in forgone short-term results, are borne now. This is the structure of what [Jacobs \(2011\)](#) calls the policy investment problem in democratic governance. Leaders are asked to impose visible present costs in exchange for benefits that others will harvest and for which they will receive no credit. Jacobs shows that democratic systems solve this problem only when institutions are deliberately designed to lengthen leaders' horizons. Policing has designed no such institutions. Indeed, the inspectorate's own examination of chief officer selection and development concluded that arrangements were unplanned and inconsistent, with little meaningful

succession planning at senior ranks ([HMICFRS and HMICS, 2019](#)), a finding that sits exactly where this analysis predicts it should.

The result is a standing tension between two modes of leadership. Performance leadership delivers and demonstrates results within tenure. Stewardship leadership builds the capability on which future results depend. Neither is dispensable, and the argument here is emphatically not that operational performance matters less than it should. The argument is that the current governance environment prices one mode and leaves the other invisible, and that leaders respond to prices. Any account of strategic police leadership that ignores this incentive structure will misdiagnose short-termism as a defect of character and prescribe development where the required prescription is accountability design. That is the diagnosis this paper brings to the Commission's reforms.

Policing is not unique in facing this problem. Hospital chief executives, headteachers and local authority leaders all serve tenures shorter than the capability cycles of their institutions, under inspection regimes that grade the present. But the problem is unusually acute in policing, where the accountability lattice is denser than in almost any comparable service, where operational crisis can end a tenure overnight, and where the creation of a National Police Service is about to redraw the relationship between local command and national capability. If custodial accountability is to be designed anywhere in the public sector, policing in 2026 offers both the sharpest need and, through the Commission's reforms, the most immediate opportunity.

Leadership Theory and the Missing Dimension

The classical leadership literature offers surprisingly little purchase on this problem. [Kotter \(1990\)](#) distinguishes leadership from management, associating leadership with the production of change and management with the production of order. [Burns \(1978\)](#) and [Bass \(1985\)](#) develop the transformational account in which leaders elevate followers' motivation and performance beyond transactional exchange. These traditions have been enormously influential in police leadership development, but they share a common frame. Their subject is the leader's behaviour and its effect on followers and change within an organisational present. The question of what a leader owes the institution across a handover of command, and of how that obligation should be observed and assessed, sits outside their field of view entirely.

[Senge \(1990\)](#) moves closer by shifting attention from the leader to the organisation, arguing that sustained advantage lies in the capacity to learn. The learning organisation is a genuinely temporal concept, concerned with capability that persists beyond any individual. What it lacks is position. Senge describes an organisational property without specifying who is answerable for it, and in hierarchical, command-oriented institutions such as policing, capability that is everyone's responsibility in general is at risk of being no one's responsibility in particular.

The closest ancestor of the present argument is [Selznick \(1957\)](#), whose distinction between administrative management and institutional leadership anticipates it by nearly seventy years. For Selznick, the institutional leader's defining task is to infuse the organisation with value beyond its immediate technical requirements and to protect its integrity and distinctive competence over time. This is custodianship in all but name. But Selznick wrote for a governance world that no longer exists. His account contains no fixed tenures, no inspection regimes, no elected principals and no performance gradings, and it therefore offers no analysis of what happens to institutional leadership when the leader's environment is engineered to reward something else. That analysis is what stewardship theory, suitably adapted, can supply.

The policing literature, meanwhile, has concentrated on a different set of questions. [Neyroud's \(2011\)](#) review of police leadership and training, which led to the creation of the College of Policing, was concerned above all with professionalisation and the machinery of development. [Herrington and Colvin \(2016\)](#) argue that the complexity of contemporary policing demands leadership distributed at all levels rather than concentrated in heroic individuals. [Grint \(2005\)](#) shows that the wicked problems policing confronts admit no purely technical solution and demand a mode of leadership that engages rather than commands. The empirical scholarship on chief officers themselves comes closest to the present concern. [Reiner \(1991\)](#) traced the transformation of chief constables from local bosses into managerial bureaucrats, and [Caless \(2011\)](#), interviewing serving chief officers, found them acutely conscious of political exposure and the precariousness of tenure. [Dobby, Anscombe and Tuffin \(2004\)](#) examined which leadership behaviours officers value and their effects on performance and conduct, whilst [Silvestri \(2003\)](#) demonstrated how a culture of competitive and continuously visible performance shapes who reaches senior rank at

all, an insight that anticipates the selection effect developed in Proposition 2 below. [Casey \(2023\)](#) documents in painful detail what the failure of leadership and culture produces. Each of these contributions matters, and the Commission draws visibly on their themes. Yet across all of them, the chief officer's temporal accountability, the question of the condition in which command is handed on, remains untheorised. The literature has asked how police leaders should lead and how they should be developed. It has not asked what they owe the institution beyond their own tenure.

Stewardship theory addresses obligation directly. Developed in reaction to agency theory's model of the self-interested manager ([Jensen and Meckling, 1976](#)), it describes leaders who gain greater utility from serving the institution than from serving themselves ([Donaldson and Davis, 1991](#), [Davis, Schoorman and Donaldson, 1997](#), [Block, 1993](#)), and [Hernandez \(2012\)](#) grounds the disposition psychologically in ownership felt towards the long term welfare of the organisation, drawing on the theory of psychological ownership developed by [Pierce, Kostova and Dirks \(2001\)](#). The proposition that good leadership leaves the organisation better than it was found is native to this tradition. What the tradition has not done is examine institutions where the conditions supporting stewardship are structurally absent, where tenure is short and fixed, principals are political, and accountability runs through external inspection rather than enduring stake. Policing is precisely such an institution. The gap this paper addresses is therefore twofold. Policing scholarship lacks a theory of chief officer custodianship, and stewardship theory lacks an account of custodianship under hostile governance conditions. The framework developed next is intended to fill both.

A Custodial Strategic Leadership Framework

Definition and domains

Custodial strategic leadership is defined here as the deliberate exercise of leadership that seeks simultaneously to deliver effective policing today whilst enhancing the long-term capability, resilience and adaptability of the organisation beyond the leader's own tenure. The definition carries three commitments. First, it is dual. It does not subordinate current performance to future capability or the reverse, which distinguishes it from accounts of transformational leadership centred on change itself. Second, it is temporal. Its unit of analysis is not the leader's behaviour but the condition of the institution across a handover, aligning it with [Selznick's \(1957\)](#) account

of institutional integrity. Third, it is positional. It attaches to the chief officer role specifically, because that is where authority to commit resources across time actually sits. The term custodial is used here in its stewardship sense, denoting the safekeeping of an institution across a handover, and carries no connotation of custody in the criminal justice sense.

The framework organises this responsibility into five interdependent domains. Operational stewardship concerns the delivery of effective and legitimate policing now. Workforce capability concerns pipelines, succession, retention and development. Organisational learning concerns evidence, research and the institutional capacity to improve. Future readiness concerns preparation for emerging crime types, technological change and shifting demand. Institutional legacy concerns the condition in which responsibility is handed on. In each domain, a performance focus and a stewardship focus can be distinguished, as Table 1 illustrates. The domains are not a typology for its own sake. They specify where the tension described in Section 3 will surface, and the propositions that follow explain when it will be resolved in favour of the short term.

Table 1. Performance and stewardship foci across the five domains

Domain	Performance focus	Stewardship focus
Operational stewardship	Service delivery and current results	Legitimacy and the capability to deliver tomorrow
Workforce capability	Filling vacancies and acting up	Pipelines, succession and retention of experience
Organisational learning	Compliance with inspection findings	Embedded evidence use and improvement capacity
Future readiness	Maintaining current systems	Anticipating demand, crime and technological change
Institutional legacy	Reputation at departure	Documented condition of the force at handover

Workforce capability: filling vacancies and Pipelines, succession and acting up, retention of experience

Organisational Compliance with Embedded evidence use and learning;
inspection findings improvement capacity

Future readiness: Maintaining current, anticipating demand, systems crime and
technological change

Institutional legacy: Reputation at departure; documented condition of the force
at handover

The motivational assumption and the governance problem

Stewardship theory rests on a motivational assumption. Stewards gain greater utility from serving the institution than from serving themselves, and where that assumption holds, controls designed for self-interested agents are unnecessary and even counterproductive ([Davis, Schoorman and Donaldson, 1997](#)). The theory's most important and least remembered insight, however, concerns the relationship between governance and motivation. Davis and colleagues argue that governance choices are partly self-fulfilling. Treat managers as agents, monitor them closely, reward only what can be observed in the short run, and agent-like behaviour is what the system will produce, whatever dispositions leaders brought with them. [Hernandez \(2012\)](#) develops the complementary point that stewardship is cultivated or extinguished by the structures within which leaders work.

Applied to policing, this insight reframes the problem described in Section 3. The accountability lattice surrounding chief officers is, in stewardship theory's terms, an agent-making machine. It observes and rewards within-tenure performance; it neither observes nor rewards custodial investment, and the policy investment problem ensures that the costs of stewardship fall on the incumbent whilst its benefits fall to a successor. The conclusion is not that chief officers lack the disposition to be stewards. It is that policing has constructed a governance environment in which stewardship is privately motivated but publicly invisible, whilst performance signalling is publicly rewarded whatever its long-term cost. The framework's purpose is to specify this mechanism precisely enough to be tested, and to identify the points at which it could be interrupted.

Propositions

Four propositions follow. Each specifies a relationship between the governance environment and the allocation of chief officer attention between performance and custodianship. They are stated formally to invite empirical examination.

Proposition 1. The shorter a chief officer's expected tenure relative to the investment cycle of a given capability, the more leadership attention will shift from building that capability towards signalling current performance.

The proposition predicts variation rather than uniform short-termism. Capabilities with short investment cycles, such as a visible enforcement initiative, should attract investment readily. Capabilities whose returns mature beyond a plausible tenure, such as a sergeant-to-superintendent pipeline, should be systematically underprovided even by well-intentioned leaders. It also predicts timing effects. Custodial investment should cluster early in tenure and decline as an anticipated departure approaches, a pattern familiar from research on political time horizons and one that could be examined empirically across forces.

Proposition 2. The more the accountability mechanisms surrounding a chief officer reward outcomes observable within their tenure, the more the chief officer will behave as a performance agent rather than a steward, irrespective of their motivational disposition.

This is the self-fulfilling governance argument transposed to policing. It implies that variation in behaviour between chief officers should be explained less by individual character than by variation in local accountability environments, for example the priorities and electoral cycle of the relevant commissioner or the proximity of an inspection. It also implies a selection effect over time. If promotion to and survival in chief officer ranks reward demonstrable within-tenure results, the population of chief officers will increasingly comprise leaders skilled at performance signalling, which is consistent with the concerns about promotion culture recorded in the Commission's evidence.

Proposition 3. Where the reporting of institutional capability carries no consequence architecture, reporting will function as compliance rather than custodianship.

The Force Management Statement is the critical case. An annual, chief constable-owned assessment of future demand and capability is, on its face, exactly the instrument a custodial model requires. The statement feeds inspection activity and informs the Chief Inspector's annual assessment ([HMICFRS, 2024](#)), so it is not without institutional use. What it is not connected to is any appointment criterion, any element of chief officer appraisal or any form of professional recognition. The framework therefore predicts that its production will function as a reporting duty rather than as an account of stewardship. The proposition predicts that capability described in such instruments will diverge over time from capability actually built, and that the instrument will have little effect on the allocation of chief officer attention. It also identifies the repair. The deficiency of the Force Management Statement is not informational but consequential, which is precisely why the Commission's proposed annual chief officer review matters more than its framing as professional development suggests.

Proposition 4. Custodial leadership becomes more likely where appointment criteria, in-role assessment and professional recognition explicitly evaluate the condition in which an organisation is handed on.

The final proposition specifies the conditions under which the mechanism described in Propositions 1 to 3 can be interrupted. If legacy is observed, valued and remembered, the horizon problem does not disappear, but its force is reduced, because custodial behaviour acquires a public payoff within the leader's own career. Concretely, this points to three connected reforms. Appointment processes for chief officer posts would examine candidates' custodial record in previous commands. The annual chief officer performance review recommended by the Commission would incorporate stewardship indicators assessed against a baseline established at appointment. And handover itself would become an assessed event, in which the condition of the force is documented at the moment responsibility transfers. Section 7 develops these mechanisms and the associated research agenda.

What the framework explains

Stated together, the propositions do work that existing accounts do not. They explain why decades of leadership development reform have produced recurring rather than resolved concerns, because successive reforms, from the [Neyroud \(2011\)](#) review through the [College of Policing \(2015\)](#) Leadership Review to the present

Commission, have repeatedly adjusted how leaders are developed whilst leaving untouched the incentive structure that governs how developed leaders behave. They explain why underinvestment in leadership development persists at every level despite near-universal agreement that it matters, since no individual leader is answerable for the aggregate consequence. And they generate testable expectations about where custodial behaviour should already be visible, namely in forces whose accountability conditions approximate those of Proposition 4. The framework is developed for chief officers within the governance architecture of England and Wales, and its extension to other public services or to policing jurisdictions with different governance arrangements is a matter for the comparative research proposed in Section 7.

Extending the Police Leadership Commission

The framework does not compete with the Commission's recommendations. It supplies the strategic logic within which they cohere, and it identifies where they will succeed or struggle. This section rereads the principal recommendations through a custodial lens, treating the report as a contemporary illustration of the theoretical tension developed above.

The proposed fast stream is, in the framework's terms, a capability investment with a maturation cycle of five to ten years, longer than any single chief officer tenure. Proposition 1 predicts exactly what its designers should fear. Locally, such investments are the first casualty of budget pressure and the last priority of a leader judged on this year's results, which is why the Commission is right to seek national protection for the scheme. But national protection is not sufficient. Fast stream officers will be developed inside forces, and whether they receive stretching postings, protected development time and serious mentoring will depend on chief officers who currently have no accountability for the pipeline's health. Without custodial accountability at force level, a nationally protected scheme can still be locally starved.

The direct entry scheme raises a different custodial question. The framework does not object to leaders entering from adjacent professions, and stewardship theory offers no reason to think custodial disposition is unique to career officers. What matters is whether appointment processes assess it. A scheme designed to import proven leaders will import performance agents if selection examines track record of delivery alone, and stewards only if it examines the condition in which candidates left their

previous institutions. The Police Federation's concern that fast progression may outrun operational grounding ([Police Federation of England and Wales, 2026](#)) can be restated in these terms. The risk is not outsiders as such but leaders whose careers have never required them to live with the long-term consequences of their own decisions.

The reform of promotion to sergeant and inspector deserves reading in the same light, not least because it is the recommendation grounded in the Commission's starkest evidence. Over three-quarters of surveyed sergeants had acted up before substantive promotion, more than half for thirteen months or longer, and the existing examinations are passed by only half of prospective sergeants and just over a third of prospective inspectors ([Police Leadership Commission, 2026](#)). In conventional terms, this is a broken process. In custodial terms, it is something more revealing. Prolonged acting up is what workforce capability looks like when it is managed as vacancy filling rather than pipeline building, the performance focus and the stewardship focus of Table 1 in miniature. Frontline supervision is the foundation on which every other capability in the framework rests, and a force that habitually runs its first line of leadership on temporary arrangements is consuming its future to staff its present. Promotion reform, on this reading, is not an administrative tidying exercise but the most fundamental capability investment available to the service, and its local implementation will depend on chief officers treating it as such.

The National Academy is the Commission's most important structural proposal, and the framework both supports and qualifies it. As system owner for leadership, the academy addresses capability at the level of the service, and Proposition 3 explains why this is necessary. No individual force can be expected to solve a collective investment problem alone. But system stewardship without positional stewardship reproduces the Force Management Statement problem at national scale, generating standards, curricula and data whilst leaving untouched the incentives of the leaders who must act on them. The academy will succeed to the extent that it makes custodianship visible and valued in individual careers, through appointment standards, through recognition and through the evidence base it builds about what capable handover looks like.

The recommendation with the greatest custodial potential is also the one framed most modestly. An annual performance review for all chief officers, including chief constables, is presented by the Commission as supportive professional development and an up-to-date assessment of performance. Proposition 4 suggests it could be considerably more. If the review incorporates stewardship indicators assessed against a baseline established at appointment, it becomes the consequence architecture that Force Management Statements lack, and the single point at which the incentive structure described in Section 3 could actually be interrupted. The same logic strengthens the case for the professional digital passport and an eventual licence to practise, which make individual capability portable and visible across the service and therefore extend custodianship from organisations to the people within them.

Measuring Leadership Legacy and a Research Agenda

If chief officers are custodians, the central evaluative question changes. It is no longer only whether performance improved during tenure but whether the organisation became better prepared for the challenges of the future than it was when the chief officer assumed leadership. This section proposes how that question could be answered in practice and what research is needed to answer it well. The intention is to propose constructs rather than finished metrics, since operationalisation is properly empirical work.

Candidate indicators follow from the framework's domains. Under workforce capability, the strength of leadership succession is measured by the depth of ready successors for critical posts, the health of the internal pipeline and the retention of experienced officers. Under organisational learning, the uptake of evidence-based practice ([Sherman, 1998](#)) and the speed and durability of response to inspection findings. Under future readiness, digital capability, the adoption of innovation and demonstrated adaptability to new demand. Alongside these sit investigative capacity, measured through accreditation levels and case file quality, and staff engagement and cultural health, for which forces already collect survey data. None of these is exotic. Most already exist in some form within Force Management Statements, inspection evidence and workforce data. What is missing is not measurement but assembly, baseline and consequence.

Culture requires separate mention because it is the slowest capability cycle of all and the one whose neglect exacts the highest price. [Casey \(2023\)](#) demonstrated that cultural failure accumulates over many tenures and many years of leadership inattention before it becomes undeniable, by which point its repair costs more than its maintenance ever would have. The Commission's call for an ethical reset, and its proposal that the National Police Service take a lead role in promoting ethical policing, recognise the problem at system level. A custodial model adds the positional counterpart. The culture a chief officer hands on, evidenced through staff survey trajectories, grievance and misconduct patterns and the willingness of officers to raise concerns, belongs in any serious account of leadership legacy, and it is the domain in which the difference between performance and stewardship is least visible in the short term and most consequential in the long term.

The mechanism proposed here has three elements. A capability baseline would be established at appointment, drawn from the Force Management Statement, inspection evidence and workforce data, and agreed between the incoming chief officer, the commissioner and the inspectorate. The annual chief officer review recommended by the Commission would then assess trajectory against that baseline alongside conventional performance. Finally, handover would become an assessed event, with the condition of the force documented and published at the moment responsibility transfers. Assessment should be triangulated between the inspectorate, the local accountability body and the proposed academy, since self-report alone would reproduce the compliance problem the framework identifies. Trajectory matters more than level, because forces begin from very different positions and a custodial model must not penalise leaders who take on struggling organisations. Indeed, one attraction of legacy assessment is that it rewards precisely those appointments.

The risks deserve an honest statement. Any indicator set invites gaming, and the literature on measurement in public services documents how metric fixation can corrupt the practices it is meant to improve ([Bevan and Hood, 2006](#); [Muller, 2018](#)). Attribution across tenures is genuinely difficult, since capability built by one leader may surface under another, and some legacies take a decade to become legible. These risks counsel design choices rather than abandonment. Narrative assessment should accompany indicators, windows should span multiple years, and moderation should be independent. The perfect measurement of legacy is not available. The question is

whether imperfect measurement of the long term is better than the current arrangement, in which the long term is not measured at all.

A research agenda follows directly from the propositions. Proposition 1 could be tested by examining whether capability investment clusters early in chief officer tenures and declines towards departure, using budget, training and workforce data across forces. Proposition 2 invites comparative work on accountability environments, asking whether custodial behaviour varies with commissioner priorities, electoral cycles and inspection proximity. Proposition 3 could be examined through longitudinal comparison of capability as described in Force Management Statements with capability as subsequently evidenced. Comparative research in Scotland and Northern Ireland, where governance arrangements differ, and in other public services with fixed leadership tenures and inspection regimes, would establish the framework's scope. Qualitative work with serving and former chief officers on how horizon pressures are actually experienced would ground all of this in the lived reality of command.

Conclusion

The Police Leadership Commission has initiated the most important national conversation about police leadership in a generation, and it has done so by asking how leaders should be attracted, developed, promoted and supported. This paper has extended that conversation by asking a prior question. What strategic responsibilities do chief officers owe to the organisations they lead and to the future of policing itself? The answer proposed here is custodial. Chief officers are not only leaders responsible for current performance but custodians of institutional capability whose responsibility extends beyond their own tenure, and the governance environment of policing currently makes that responsibility invisible, unrewarded and therefore systematically under-discharged. The Custodial Strategic Leadership Framework and its propositions specify the mechanism and the repair. The Commission's own recommendations, above all the annual chief officer review, provide the vehicle through which the repair could begin.

The enduring measure of strategic police leadership is not simply whether chief officers improve organisational performance during their tenure, but whether they

leave behind a police service that is more capable, more resilient and better prepared for the challenges of the next generation.

Conflict of interest statement

The author is Editor of the International Journal of Criminology and Policing Education. To protect the integrity of the review process, the author has been and will remain fully recused from all editorial handling and decision-making in relation to this submission. The manuscript has been assigned to an independent handling editor, and the author will have no access to reviewer identities, reviewer reports or editorial correspondence relating to it. The author declares no other financial or non-financial interests relevant to the content of this article.

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Ethics statement

This is a conceptual article. It involved no human participants and no primary data collection, and therefore required no ethical approval.

Artificial intelligence use statement

A generative artificial intelligence tool was used during the preparation of this manuscript to assist with drafting, structuring and reference checking. All conceptual claims, arguments, interpretations and conclusions are the author's own. Every source cited has been verified by the author against the original publication. The author has reviewed and edited all text and takes full responsibility for the content of the published article.

Data availability statement

No new data were created or analysed in this study. Data sharing does not apply to this article.

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