



The future role of police authorities in community engagement:

learning from three demonstration projects

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Introduction

This paper is a short summary of key learning points from three community engagement demonstration sites in Cheshire, Merseyside, and Northumbria police authorities. It is intended for police authority staff and members, and police officers, both strategic and operational. It may also be of use to community safety partners as it highlights some of the potential roles police authorities can have in relation to community engagement. A full case-study report on each demonstration site, containing further detail about outcomes and transferable learning, can be found at <http://police.homeoffice.gov.uk/>

Background

Police authorities have for some time had a statutory role in relation to consulting communities, most recently consolidated in the Police Act 1996. They have traditionally favoured public meetings as a means of attempting to perform their duty to obtain the views and co-operation of local people. Previous research has suggested that this approach has not been successful in delivering effective community engagement. Home Office research into the role of police authorities in community engagement found that, although some authorities had moved away from relying solely on public meetings, the effectiveness of community engagement still varied both between and within authority areas.¹

The importance of facilitating effective and ongoing community engagement has been brought into sharper focus by the development and roll-out of the Government's police reform programme and, in particular, the citizen-focused policing and neighbourhood policing agendas. Citizen-focused policing – a key objective of the reform programme – calls for a police service which responds to the needs of communities and individuals, and inspires public confidence in the police. As part of delivering this commitment, the White Paper *Building Communities, Beating Crime* (Home Office, November 2004) states that every community in England and Wales will be benefiting from an accessible and responsive neighbourhood policing approach by 2008.

Effective community engagement will be essential to the successful delivery of neighbourhood policing. Neighbourhood policing aims to put local people's own community safety concerns and priorities at the heart of local policing. Neighbourhood policing teams will work with communities themselves, as well as with other partners, to tackle the issues that matter most to local people. Although it is not a stated objective of neighbourhood policing to deliver community engagement for its own sake, genuine and sustained engagement between the police service and the communities it serves will be vital to building the relationships of trust, familiarity and active and informed co-operation which a neighbourhood policing approach requires.

A Police and Justice Bill was introduced to Parliament in January 2006. The legislation substitutes a new Section 96 of the Police Act 1996. This will enable the Secretary of State to make an order requiring arrangements to be made by police authorities to obtain the views of local people about policing. Police authorities will still have a duty to engage, though the detail of the requirement will be set out in secondary, rather than primary, legislation.² Authorities also have engagement considerations relating to local policing summaries, introduced by the Serious Organised Crime and Police Act 2005; the 'face the people' sessions proposed in the Respect Action Plan; and the Community Call for Action, also introduced by the Police and Justice Bill. Police authorities are also required to consult with local people in their role as members of Crime and Disorder Reduction Partnerships (CDRPs).

These legislative considerations, along with the roll-out of neighbourhood policing and the recent review of the Crime and Disorder Act 1998, will all impact on police authorities' future role in community engagement. Learning from this project should help inform authorities thinking when they look to define their role in the developing landscape of community safety.

¹ See Myhill *et al.* (2003) *The role of police authorities in public engagement*. London: Home Office OLR 37/03.

² It should be noted that, at the time of writing, amendments are still being made to the Bill.

The Community Engagement in Policing Project

The twin drivers of previous research findings on the role and effectiveness of police authorities in carrying out their duty to consult and the ongoing police reform agenda persuaded the Home Office Police Reform Unit and the Association of Police Authorities to make a bid to the Treasury Invest-to-Save budget to fund an innovative project on community engagement in the police authority context. The **Community Engagement in Policing Project** was intended to collate and disseminate existing effective practice on engaging communities, as well as test new approaches. There were two strands to the project. One strand looked at developing practical community engagement tools and resources for use by practitioners on the ground, and was driven by a national panel of practitioners from police authorities and forces. The National Practitioner Panel for Community Engagement in Policing produced a guide to community engagement, incorporating a searchable database of effective practice examples. It can be accessed at www.communityengagement.police.uk

The second strand of the project involved testing different approaches to community engagement in three police authority areas: Cheshire, Merseyside, and Northumbria. Funding was provided for a new member of staff in each demonstration site, to be based in the respective police authority. Funding for these posts lasted for a fixed period of eighteen months. The post holders' roles all had a different emphasis.

Cheshire: Marketing and performance management. In Cheshire, the post holder sought to improve the way the police service communicated with communities, partly by introducing new methods and perspectives and a marketing approach. The role was also intended to help effect organisational change and was aligned to an existing programme to refocus policing on communities' needs.

Merseyside: A multi-agency approach. In Merseyside the post-holder sought to increase the effectiveness of multi-agency working in delivering community engagement initiatives and outcomes. This included creating better links between the authority and the force, wider CDRP partners, and voluntary and community groups.

Northumbria: Creating an ongoing dialogue with communities. In Northumbria the post-holder sought to identify communities with whom the police service was not engaging effectively and to create a sustainable engagement process. A community development approach was used in two rural areas to involve community members and partner agencies in identifying and addressing local problems.

All three demonstration sites delivered positive outcomes on their agreed objectives at a local level. This report summarises key transferable strategic and operational learning from the demonstration sites. It also summarises transferable learning around working in partnership.

Key strategic learning

These projects have demonstrated that police authorities can be at the forefront of developing and promoting community engagement. Key potential roles include the following.

- Drive organisational culture change in the police service. In **Cheshire** the authority's post holder played a key role in convincing officers of all ranks of the value of engagement. In **Merseyside** the post holder demonstrated to members the benefits of using a range of engagement methods tailored to different groups and communities.
- Play a strategic monitoring role. In both **Cheshire** and **Northumbria** the post holders undertook community profiling to highlight gaps in engagement provision.
- Play a strategic enabling role. In both **Cheshire** and **Northumbria** the post holders were able to identify skills gaps and provide training to police officers on engagement, including introducing new techniques and approaches. In **Merseyside** the post holder produced a

toolkit to help staff and members choose appropriate methods to meet specific engagement aims, and checklists of what would be involved in delivery.

- Collate and disseminate effective practice on community engagement. In **all three sites** the post holders made examples of effective practice available to police officers, authority members and staff.
- Act as a 'gateway' between the police service and communities that have an historic mistrust of the police. Post holders in **all three sites** were able to perform this role. A police authority employee was seen as impartial and was trusted by a range of minority and hard-to-reach communities, enabling relationships gradually to be built with the force.
- Be at the forefront of brokering a multi-agency approach to engagement. In **Merseyside** the post holder used a bottom-up approach to demonstrate the benefits of multi-agency working, in order to gain support at a more strategic level. In **Northumbria** the post holder introduced neighbourhood beat teams to a wider range of partner agencies to facilitate effective problem-solving.
- Learn lessons from other organisations who are further ahead with mainstreaming community engagement. **Merseyside** police authority developed a reciprocal relationship with MerseyTravel and benefited from a range of advice and practical tools. Learning from this organisation helped authority members to recognise that developing an engagement focus was an ongoing, long-term process.

Key operational learning

- Community profiling provides a useful assessment of the coverage of community engagement. Informal profiling in both **Cheshire** and **Northumbria** enabled the targeting of groups and communities not previously engaged. A useful practical tool was developed by the post holder in **Cheshire**. In **Northumbria**, commercial software was used to profile responses from a survey consultation exercise to determine which sections of communities were under-represented or not represented.
- Frontline staff can be empowered to undertake community engagement. In **Cheshire**, beat officers, community support officers, and volunteer special constables were successfully trained to facilitate local action meetings and communicate directly with local media. In **Northumbria**, community development methods and skills were successfully passed from the post holder to beat officers, including how to facilitate action meetings and how to develop and monitor action planning and problem-solving exercises.
- A police authority employee from a non-policing background can help operational officers apply fresh thinking to community engagement. In **Cheshire** the post holder helped officers engage effectively with young people by making the process accessible and relevant to them. In **Northumbria** the post holder involved a wider range of partners in problem-solving, including organisations officers had not previously considered.
- Local people can be empowered to take ownership of aspects of the engagement process. In **Northumbria** residents were given training in survey administration and health and safety issues and undertook their own local survey of crime and disorder problems and attitudes towards policing.
- Increasing channels of communication can foster positive community engagement. In **Northumbria** the post holder helped beat officers to set up voicemail and e-mail services for neighbourhood policing teams. 'Post boxes' were also provided in rural areas. These confidential means of contacting the police increased the amount of intelligence received from the community, as well as making it easier to provide feedback to individuals.

- It is important to be clear about the aims and purpose of engagement. In both **Cheshire** and **Northumbria** the post holders encouraged beat officers to be clear that local action meetings were intended to prioritise existing resources, not to provide extra policing.

Key partnership learning

- Partnership working on community engagement benefits from clearly defined and agreed roles and responsibilities and the direction of a 'lead' agency. In **Merseyside** the police authority were able to provide administrative and facilitative support, whilst voluntary organisations organised access and suitable venues.
- It is often useful to harness existing groups and networks, and 'piggy-back' on existing engagement events, as opposed to starting from scratch. In **Merseyside** the post holder used previous contacts within CDRPs and the voluntary sector to initiate partnership working. In **Northumbria**, using existing partnerships and networks in one area helped the project quickly to gain, and to maintain, momentum.
- Partner agencies should be involved at all stages of the engagement process, including planning. In **Cheshire**, partner agencies not fully involved in planning engagement were concerned about being committed to provide resources that were not available. In **Northumbria** early involvement of partner agencies helped ensure their 'buy-in'.
- Communication should be directed at all relevant parts of partner agencies. In **Cheshire**, it was found that communication with one local authority department was not always passed on to other relevant departments.
- Involving a wide range of partners can be beneficial to local problem-solving initiatives. In **Northumbria** the post holder involved local schools, churches, parish councils, and a private development trust, as well as more recognised community safety partners. This helped to lever extra resources into local communities.
- Many familiar difficulties with multi-agency working were evident in **Merseyside**, including local politics and personalities, the absence of shared funding streams and performance indicators, and concerns over maintaining agencies' identities.

The importance of context

These projects demonstrated that having roles dedicated to community engagement can sharpen the focus on engagement issues across the service. However, these roles will only be effective if the context in which the post holder is placed enables him or her to achieve his or her aims and objectives. Police authorities must ensure they do the following.

- Recruit an individual with an appropriate skill set.
- Give the post holder appropriate authority. If the post holder is expected to help effect organisational change s/he must have the status and ability to operate at all levels of the organisation.
- Have clear organisational aims and objectives for community engagement which are agreed and compatible with those of partner organisations, particularly the force.

The support of authority members is also crucial if roles intended to mainstream community engagement are to be effective. **Cheshire** and **Merseyside** both used supportive, engagement focused members to champion their projects and attempt to convince more sceptical colleagues of the benefits.