

Strategic Police-Community Engagement:

A Report to the Scottish Police Authority

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This report was commissioned by the Scottish Police Authority to examine the issue of strategic police-community engagement in England and Wales. It addresses a notable gap in the research evidence base in that, whilst there has been considerable attention paid to operational and tactical forms of engagement often in relation to community policing programmes, more strategic uses have been neglected. The analysis conducted is used to inform a position about how and why the development of a methodology for strategic engagement by police organisations is likely to be significant in the future. For the purposes of this report 'strategic community engagement' is defined as formal interaction and communication with members of the public that is undertaken to inform policy development and strategic decision-making. In this sense, it is distinct from more operational forms of engagement that directly shape service delivery at a local level.

A CASE STUDY IN ENGAGEMENT: OPERATION ALTON¹

On the evening of 19th January 2012, officers from South Wales Police and the Wales Extremism and Counter-Terrorism Unit entered the Canton Community Centre in Cardiff with the intent of disrupting a meeting being held by Al Ghurabaa. This group, closely allied with the organisation Muslims Against Crusades that had been proscribed by the Home Secretary two months previously, had taken to holding private meetings in venues in the local area. Their public and private activities were starting to generate considerable concern amongst the local Muslim population.

In part the increase in community concern reflected several recent events, including the arrest in December 2010 of five men from Cardiff for their part in an alleged plot to blow up the London Stock Exchange, and then when 2 local men were traced to Kenya trying to join a terrorist group. Set against this backdrop, the increasing public visibility of some of the key actors involved with the Al Ghurabaa group and their seeming ability to act with impunity were proving troubling. These community concerns had been relayed to the police at a senior level through well established formal and informal channels of engagement.

¹ This is not the real name of the Operation.

The police action in Canton was therefore designed to overtly disrupt the group with the aim of sending a message both to those allied to Al Ghurabaa and the wider community. The formal aims set out in the operational order were to:

- Engage in overt disruption;
- Dismantle the Al Ghurabaa infrastructure;
- Divert individuals from radicalization;
- Respond to legitimate public concern.

It was, according to the ACPO Prevent Delivery Unit, "...the first direct disruption of this kind to take place nationally."²

The police action was designed to combine 'Pursue' and 'Prevent' activities. Whilst the meeting was in progress, officers interrupted proceedings and informed those present that the meeting was being stopped and that any further meetings were prohibited from taking place on venues owned by Cardiff Council. One man was arrested at the scene for attacking an officer. Several others who were known by police to be heavily involved in the group were given letters advising them formally that they were of interest to the police. Other attendees who, based upon prior intelligence, were not identified as being subjects of interest were offered a Counter Terrorism Prevent leaflet. The police infrastructure was also mobilised to monitor potential 'displacement' activity.

Subsequent to the operation, police Prevent engagement officers worked with in excess of two dozen individuals who were judged suitable for a Prevent intervention, a number of whom were assessed as requiring long-term support. In the immediate aftermath of the raid, the police undertook a concerted communications campaign involving meetings with all of the local Imams, reassurance uniformed patrols in the local neighbourhoods and media outputs. The purpose being to explain and justify the intervention that they had performed and why, given that it was likely to be publicly contested by those subject to it.

Operation Alton was a relatively unremarkable counter-terrorism operation. In the current geo-political climate, similar policing actions are mounted every week across the United Kingdom. As Chief Superintendent Belinda Davies, BCU Commander for Cardiff and someone central to the planning and design of what happened, describes it "It was a relatively straight forward 35 minute policing operation." What makes it interesting from the point of view of this report is how it exemplifies the ways that a deliberately programmed process of strategic engagement with both key community members and public sector partners can inform what police do, and transform the community impacts that their interventions have.

The decision to take on a group engaging in non-violent extremist activities in an overt manner was obviously freighted with risk. Indeed, if things had gone wrong in terms of the execution of the operation, then this could have caused reputational damage to the police in Cardiff and beyond. But the methodology that was developed using defined strategic engagement processes was important in de-risking this potential.

² ACPO Prevent Delivery Unit Update, 22, September 2012.

Strategic engagement between the police and community was important in creating the momentum for the intervention in the first place, but also in terms of the consequence management activities that were performed. But strategic relationships between the police and their partners in Cardiff Council were equally important in terms of framing the decision to act. This has been publicly acknowledged by a DCI from WECTU:

“The initial disruptive phase was instigated as a result of concerns from the local community, which is testament to the excellent relationship we have with them. The strong support from all of Cardiff’s Muslim communities was crucial in enabling us to take action against a very small number of individuals whose activities were of obvious concern.”³

The need to do something about extremist groups meeting on council property was something that was agreed by senior police and the Chief Executive of the Council. Indeed, the letter that was prepared and read out to the meeting attendees informing them that they could not continue with their current activities, was jointly drafted by legal teams from both the police and council.

Senior officers from the Council were also invited into the police command centre on the night of the disruption intervention in order that they could directly observe the police carry it out. In terms of thinking about the learning for the practical conduct of strategic engagement, it is important to be clear that this did not entail broadcasting what was going to happen. Only a few individuals across the key agencies involved knew the details of what was going to happen prior to the operation starting. But the innovative aspect operationally was thinking about how strategic engagement activities would ‘kick in’ as soon as the operational phases had concluded.

The methodology implemented in this respect divided key potential stakeholders in to different tiers. Those in ‘Tier 1’ were individuals in key agencies who had complete knowledge of what was planned because they were directly engaged in delivering Operation Alton. Tier 2 were key stakeholders who were informed about what had happened at the first opportunity that presented itself once operational activity was underway. Tier 3 included the media and were told next and so forth. The concept being a kind of ‘trickle down’ system, where the ‘need to know’ principle was progressively widened. An important element of this was that the public communication ‘lines’ were carefully scripted for all levels of public interaction in advance. This stretched from the commentary to be offered by senior police and the Chief Executive, right down to a script for PCSOs engaging in reassurance patrols in the aftermath of the over counter-terrorist work.

Operationally one of the important aspects of how the action was designed was the seamless switch from ‘pursue’ to ‘prevent’ aspects of the CONTEST strategy. There was no lag allowed in terms of the ‘pick up’ mounted by local policing assets in recognition of the fact that overt counter-terrorist policing was relatively unusual and might cause public concern. But this was also programmed in because it was anticipated that those involved in the disrupted group would try to ‘spin’ events in the

³ P.4 ACPO Prevent Delivery Unit Update, 22, September 2012.

media. This turned out to be an accurate forecast. However, because police had been transparent in how they had conducted the operation and had proactively and ‘assertively’ sought to communicate their messages around the activity, the ‘definition of the situation’ they were seeking to project prevailed with the vast majority of the public. The community impact assessment conducted by the police, and the press and broadcast coverage of the event, suggested majority support for what they did and how. Indeed, two years later, Ch. Supt Davies identifies that she receives regular requests for police to employ this kind of overt, high profile disruption operation again.

What this points to is how the right kind of strategic engagement methodology can both provide potentially contentious police interventions with a degree of public legitimacy, and afford them a significant ‘afterlife’ in terms of amplifying the positive community impacts they deliver. In this regard, Operation Alton acquired the properties of what Innes (2014) terms a ‘control signal.’⁴ It was after all just a ‘35 minute policing operation’, but one that was conducted a way that sent a message to local communities about the police being responsive to their concerns, and taking action to protect them from potential harm.

There are a number of ‘lessons to be learned’ from this case study of how strategic community engagement can be used to inform the policing of contentious and contested issues. These can be summarized as follows:

- There needs to be a shared recognition and definition of a problem that needs to be solved. In Cardiff in 2012 the vast majority of the community, police and council all agreed that something was happening about which something needed doing.
- The ability to reach such a consensus, was at least in part, predicated upon strong community and partner relations. Investment in building social capital in advance of problems emerging, rather than trying to forge such relation in a ‘hot climate’, is important.
- Being transparent and accountable about what is being done and why, is a vital ingredient in terms of securing public permission.
- In a changed political climate where political and public expectations about increased levels of accountability are evident, overt police interventions are generally preferable wherever possible. Covert policing is a necessary part of the police toolkit when dealing with serious and organised risks, but needs to be retained as a method of last resort, to be utilised only when it is not possible to act in a more visible and accountable fashion.
- The communication strategy, utilising multiple platforms and channels, was built into the operational design. It was not an adjunct or an afterthought to the intervention. As soon as the operational activity was concluded, the information campaign was ‘ramped up’ to explain to the public what was happening and why.
- Systematic and structured community impact assessment processes can play an important role in helping to manage down the legacies and consequences of contested interventions in positive ways.

⁴ Innes, M. (2014) *Signal Crimes: Social Reactions to Crime, Disorder and Control*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.

- Such ways of working have significant legacy effects. This includes shifting public expectations about how policing will be conducted in the future, something that it is not clear that it has always been possible to sustain.

More broadly, this case study highlights how effective community engagement can be used to both inform strategic decision-making in relation to formulating policing interventions, but also help to manage the community impacts of such actions, especially where they are contentious and contested.

OVERVIEW

In seeking to develop the insights set out above and explore some of their implications, the rest of this report engages with these issues both conceptually and empirically. Accordingly, the key insights reported are derived from a review of the relevant academic and policy literatures, in conjunction with several case studies that delineate particular aspects of engagement in action. The next section starts in a more philosophical and historical register in order to establish why taking account of community views and perspectives is afforded such prominence in the British policing model. This discussion frames the second part of the report where a more detailed account is provided of how particular police – community engagement strategies and tactics are operationalised in practise. A second case study of Independent Advisory Groups is introduced at this point to demonstrate how the considerations outlined above translate into practice. The third section takes these findings and tests them against the present and likely future situation of policing. The point being to configure an anticipatory understanding of how, when and why police might want to engage in the future.

A SHORT HISTORY OF WHY ENGAGEMENT MATTERS

What is often referred to as ‘the British policing model’ is premised, in part, upon a ‘foundation myth’. The ‘Peelian Principles’, together with their associated notions of ‘policing by consent’ and that ‘the police are the public, and the public are the police’, that are routinely invoked by police leaders today, were constructs distilled over time, rather than acutely perceptive soundbites coined by Sir Robert Peel in 1829. This is important, as Reiner (2010) identifies, because otherwise there is a tendency to negate and downplay the popular resistance that the introduction of the idea of the new police elicited for much of the 19th century, and that policing still generates on occasion today.⁵

Acknowledging that these principles have been historically constructed and refined does not however mean that they are without power or consequence. Because of how they have been used and by whom, they have come to form the publicly accepted principles of the British policing model. As a consequence of which, perhaps more than in almost any other comparable jurisdiction, what the

⁵ Reiner, R. (2010) *The Politics of the Police* (3rd edn.). Oxford: Oxford University Press.

public thinks of the police matters. So where American commentators often refer to police as 'law enforcement', in the UK we have tended to hold on to a more complex notion of the police function. This is manifest in the widely accepted concepts of 'constabulary independence' and police discretion, which alert us to the fact that police are doing more than just enforcing law in performance of their role.

There is though something of an inherent tension between some of these principles. The idea that police should exercise their power and authority consensually, and that they part of the public, conveys a certain sense of closeness. Whilst at the same time, notions of independence and acting 'without fear nor favour' implies a need for a certain distance from the public. It is perhaps unsurprising therefore that historically there have been periodic debates about where precisely the appropriate balance lies between being close to communities that are being served, versus retaining distance. The latter risks police coming to be seen as lacking in legitimacy, whereas the converse problem of over-identification is a potential invitation to corruption.

Mapping out these tensions and how they are 'woven into the fabric' of the British policing model is important in helping to clarify how and why debates about community engagement are so important. Quite proper questions arise with regards to who should be engaged with, under what conditions, how and for what purposes? It also helps to explain why engagement strategies and the significance of being publicly accountable receives such prominence in many contemporary policing strategies and discussions.

ENGAGING THE PRESENT

Despite the importance engagement is accorded in many contemporary policing plans and strategies, and the amount of 'police talk' that attends to it, comparatively little research has systematically tested the efficacy of different engagement methods to robustly establish 'what works' to increase the reach and effectiveness of these. Instead, discussions of engagement techniques are typically embedded in broader programme evaluations of specific initiatives – many of which are focused upon forms of community policing.

For instance, Skogan's (2006) assessment of the Chicago Alternative Policing Strategy is exemplary in showing how innovative use of large-scale social surveys and regular police-community meetings drove reform of the delivery of policing, as part of a wider change programme.⁶ Similar engagement methods have also been a prominent feature in the development and delivery of Neighbourhood Policing in the UK (Barnes and Eagle, 2007).⁷ In both settings,

⁶ Skogan, W. (2006) *Police and Community in Chicago*. New York: Oxford University Press.

⁷ Barnes, I. and Eagle, T. (2007) 'The role of community engagement in Neighbourhood Policing', *Policing: A Journal of Policy and Practice* 1/2: 161-72.

these methods were intended to provide insights into what local public priorities for policing were, rather than police assuming that they know what issues need to be tackled. There is some evidence from the studies conducted that the engagement work resulted in: reduced levels of disorder and anti-social behaviour; increased feelings of safety; improved public confidence in the police; and changes to police officers' attitudes and behaviours (Tuffin et al., 2006).⁸

It would be misleading however to restrict the relevance and impact of engagement just to highly visible forms of community work. A seminal finding of the early academic studies of policing was that one of the primary determinants of whether crimes are solved or not, is the quality and quantity of information provided to the police about potential suspects by members of the public cast as witnesses (Reiner, 2010). As such, maintaining channels of communication with citizens, in order that they can and want to provide such information to police when they need to, is an important element of thinking about the value of engagement to the police mission. It is not just about what is delivered in the here and now, but what communication social infrastructure is developed that can be activated when needed to respond to particular risks and threats.

A different perspective on this issue is obtained by thinking about what happens when effective engagement is not present and policing is done to people rather than with them. This is a problem that has appeared most acutely and repeatedly in police relations with minority ethnic communities. For example, Lord Scarman's report into the major public disorders in Brixton in 1981, identified aggressive policing tactics and a failure of the police to account for their approach to the community, as a primary cause of the violence.⁹ In response to which, police consultative groups involving 'leaders' from key Black communities were established in a number of urban areas, in an attempt to institutionalize communication channels. However, in practice they were often fractious and fragile.

As a model of engagement these meeting based forms of interaction were, to all intents and purposes, reinvented as Independent Advisory Groups (IAGs) in 1999 following the racist murder of Stephen Lawrence and the manifest failings of the police response to this crime (ACPO, 2011). This tradition of 'small p' political engagement, whereby communities are engaged via contacts with representatives drawn from their purported 'leaders' of a particular grouping has been carried over into the *Prevent*¹⁰ programme of the last few years, and much of the work that has been conducted with Muslim communities.

⁸ Tuffin, R. et al. (2006) *An evaluation of the impact of the National Reassurance Policing Programme*. London: Home Office Research Study 296.

⁹ Scarman, L. (1982) *The Scarman Report: The Brixton Disorders April 10-13 1981*. London: Penguin.

¹⁰ Prevent is an integral part of the UK's cross-departmental counter terrorism strategy – CONTEST – and aims to stop people from becoming terrorists or supporting terrorism by challenging extremist ideology and tackling the

A CASE STUDY OF INDEPENDENT ADVISORY GROUPS

Independent Advisory Groups have become part of the institutional infrastructure of how many police forces interact with minority ethnic and other vulnerable communities. In terms of the scope and focus of this report, it is this institutionalised dimension that is especially important. Moreover, they serve to demonstrate how positive working relationships can be struck, even with groups who have historically had little trust in the police. This is not to say that these working relations are always trouble free and without tension. But for the most part, it seems that they do offer practical benefits, although realising these benefits frequently requires considerable investment by all those involved.

These are qualities exemplified by Operation Trident in London and their use of the IAG model. Trident was originally set up in 2000 in an attempt to provide a more effective response to the growing number of firearm offences committed by young black men against young black men. Since its establishment, the focus of Trident has been expanded and elaborated, but its original purpose was to try and reduce the overall number of fatal shootings that were occurring involving young black men, and to increase the very low detection rates for these types of crime.

In part, the detection rate problem was a reflection of a lack of trust and confidence in the police. These were negative sentiments amplified by certain operational tactics being utilized by police, including high rates of stop and search and other deliberately visible interventions, impacting disproportionately in black communities. The problems that this toxic combination of factors was creating as an impediment to more effective policing were readily acknowledged by the Head of Trident when he was interviewed,

The reasons underlining were simple. People weren't confident in the police so they weren't prepared to come forward as witnesses and give evidence.

The membership of the IAG was drawn from across the black communities in London. Critically, this did not just involve those who were more well disposed towards the police, but included individuals who had been vocal opponents of what the police had been doing. Agreements were brokered with individuals about what membership of the IAG involved, including not divulging confidential information and accepting that due to operationally sensitive matters, the police would not always be able to tell the IAG members everything they might want to know. For the most part, it seems that compliance with such conditions was upheld.

radicalisation of vulnerable people. Prevent is delivered by a wide range of organisations including the police service.

As confidence grew on both sides, the IAG members came to play an increasingly important role in the work of Trident. For example, it is reported that on a number of occasions, following high profile fatal shootings in Lambeth, IAG members accompanied police when they were conducting stop and search campaigns. In doing so they both observed the police activity, but also often helped to explain to the subjects of such actions why the police were utilizing these tactics. In addition to this more tactical side, the IAG played an important role in providing strategic advice about the development of forward strategy. Members were influential in diversifying the range of interventions conducted under the auspices of Trident, and in particular, the development of a more preventative imperative.

It is important to reiterate that relations between police and IAG were not always easy, but the institutionalization of a communication channel afforded police insights into community perceptions and sentiments that they probably would have not been aware of otherwise. As part of an ethnographic study of the policing of gun crime in London, Roberts (2010) who observed a number of police-community meetings in Lambeth, noted that although on the surface the public interactions could be very antagonistic, some of the most important exchanges took places 'in the margins' of the meetings.¹¹ Confronted by the challenges of trying to tackle serious and organized violence, the 'front-stage' interactions could appear conflict riven, whilst the 'back stage' informal conversations were still happening, with important information flowing both ways.

The original IAG concept has been adopted by many forces, as noted previously. As part of the research conducted to inform this report, an interview was conducted with the person who set up Surrey Police's IAG. He described how he took the basic concept of a forum for strategic engagement with a select number of people, that would allow for the testing of possible ideas and tactics in a safe environment, and adapted it for use in Surrey. One of the key decisions he identifies was to do with the selection of the possible membership. As he described it,

I didn't want the 'usual suspects', the self appointed 'community leaders', who we always talked to. I knew I needed people who were credible with the communities that we wanted to reach out to. I did a lot of research into this aspect...a lot. This proved quite difficult in respect of a couple of people, but I knew this was the right approach. If it was going to work then we needed people who would be credible out there, and were not just going to tell us what they thought we wanted to hear....We weren't after another democratic mechanism we had that, we needed something different. This was not the police authority, we had one of those. The IAG performed a different function for us.

The last comment about the relationship between the function of the IAG and the Police Authority is particularly important given the interests of this report. For

¹¹ Roberts, C. (2010) Unpublished PhD University of Surrey.

what it implies is a distinction being drawn between a democratic form of accountability and engagement, and a second form with more direct operational relevance. It is a distinction that starts to key into some of the complexities involved in governance of the police. Indeed, there was some friction between the police authority and the IAG.

The process of establishing the IAG in Surrey involved a period of trust building, and some trial and error about how the police and community representatives could work together. As the relationship matured, so the use of the IAG altered. As described during the interview, for high profile raids the police started briefing the IAG members in advance that some action was about to happen. This would not involve divulging operational details, but allowed the IAG members to be positioned to help manage the community impacts that frequently arise in the aftermath of overt police operations. As a result of this more participative approach the IAG provided feedback to the police that actually the community really did not like high profile, overt counter-terrorism policing raids. They asked “would it not be possible for the police to do this aspect of their work more ‘quietly’?” without bringing journalists along, and having lots of uniformed officers around, on the grounds that these aspects amplified the negative public perception associated with such interventions. The police took this feedback on board and amended their methodology to take account of it.

From this case study and the cursory review of the literature that preceded it, we are starting to piece together some of the ways police engage with the public across a variety of roles, situations and using a diversity of methods (Lloyd and Foster, 2009).¹² Cutting across these permutations, it can be discerned that the variety of methods that police employ to connect, interact and communicate with citizens and communities can be reduced to four principal motivations:

- 1) To enhance the intelligence base on crime and disorder problems and/or the people that cause them;
- 2) Inform the public about aspects of policing;
- 3) To listen to local communities key concerns and issues; and,
- 4) Aid the response to particular situations and problems.

Broadly speaking, the available research literature has been quite critical of how police typically seek to engage with various sectors of the public. Concern is regularly voiced about a police preference for consultation methodologies that are often relatively inflexible, lacking in nuance, and frequently unrepresentative (Myhill 2006; Jones and Newburn, 2007).¹³ For whilst there are a multitude of

¹² Lloyd, K. & Foster, J. (2009) *Citizen Focus & Community Engagement : A Review of the Literature*. The Police Foundation.

¹³ Myhill, A. (2006). *Community Engagement in Policing: Lessons from the Literature*. London: Home Office.; Jones, T. and Newburn, N. (2001). *Widening Access: Improving Police Relations with Hard to Reach Groups Police Research Series, Paper 138*. London: Home Office.

methods that could be used to ‘take the temperature’ of public sentiment and opinion, overwhelmingly police tend to rely upon community meetings and quantitative public opinion surveys (Rousell and Gascon, 2014).¹⁴ Any such doubts and worries are compounded by a growing awareness of the increasingly diverse and complex nature of many communities, rendering it increasingly challenging for police to harness methods that can adequately capture the range of views and perspectives that are a feature of today’s fluid and morphing communities.

In one of the few attempts to synthesise and summarise the lessons learnt from all the research conducted, Myhill (2006) notes high rates of implementation failure (see also Neyroud, 2001).¹⁵ What emerges from Myhill’s structured review of the literature is that police organisations appear to find it very hard to sustain robust engagement that reaches across various communities and identities over time. Developing his analysis he identifies several critical success factors for implementing community engagement, including:

- Organisational commitment and culture change – because the police service is some way from understanding the benefits engagement can afford;
- Mainstreaming – it needs to be seen as ‘core work’ rather than the responsibility of a particular department or project;
- Sharing power with communities – too often engagement is done ‘to’ rather than ‘with’ communities;
- Tailoring and local flexibility – local officers need to be afforded discretion about how to make engagement work in particular contexts, rather than being held to inflexible, generic standards of practice;
- Performance management – performance assessments need to reward effective engagement work;
- Training and capacity building – both police and public need ‘up-skilling’ to make engagement work;
- Confidence and trust – engagement rarely happens in ‘clean sites’ and very often there is a legacy of poor relations, especially for minority ethnic communities, that police need to appreciate and work within;
- Communication - partnerships need dialogue, not one-way broadcasting;
- Partnership working – especially for community policing programmes, police need to engage their public sector partners as well as themselves, to tackle ‘quality of life issues’

¹⁴ Rousell, A. & Gascon, L. (2014) ‘Defining “policeability”’: Cooperation, control and resistance in South Los Angeles Community-Police Meetings’, *Social Problems*. 61.2: 237-58.

¹⁵ Myhill, A. (2006). *Community Engagement in Policing: Lessons from the Literature*. London: Home Office; Neyroud, P. (2001) *Public participation in policing*. London: IPPR.

Developing some of these themes, both Rousell and Gascon (2014) and Carr (2006) tease out some of the interactional difficulties involved in police-community engagements that serve to inhibit the efficacy of such initiatives.¹⁶ Focusing in particular upon meetings, they note a police tendency to want to control the agenda that often generates resistance from communities.

One additional point worth flagging up concerns the general lack of awareness of the principles of political communication amongst police officers. There is a tendency to reach for familiar methods in familiar circumstances without seemingly taking account of what is known about the most effective and persuasive ways to communicate messages to people.¹⁷ This lack of awareness is becoming increasingly important in the new media ecology suffused as it is, by social media communication platforms – a topic returned to presently. In particular, there is often an assumption made by police that the public always wants to engage with them. It is an assumption that as Herbert (2006) notes creates unrealistic expectations about the capacity and capability of communities to engage in police programmes.¹⁸ Indeed, one of the key emergent learning points from studies of the ways police use social media as a community engagement method, is how rather than looking for an ‘always on’ relationship with the police, most citizens and communities prefer something more dynamic. They are frequently looking for engagement that can be turned ‘off and on’ as needed, driven often by local events.

From this scan of the available literature, it can be discerned that there are two critical questions that police leaders need to ask in seeking to assess the quality of activity ‘How are we engaging?’ and ‘why are we engaging?’ The first of these attends to whether the methods are appropriate and whether they have sufficient ‘reach’ to encompass the variety of views that are ‘out there’ in the public sphere. The ‘why’ question seeks to clarify the purpose or intent of any engagement effort.

ENGAGING THE FUTURE

The previous sections of this report have touched upon the uses of engagement by police both historically and in relation to aspects of the present. In this penultimate section the focus turns to issues of how and why strategic forms of

¹⁶ Rousell, A. & Gascon, L. (2014) ‘Defining “policeability”: Cooperation, control and resistance in South Los Angeles Community-Police Meetings’, *Social Problems*. 61.2: 237-58; Carr, P. (2006) *Clean Streets*. New York: New York University Press.

¹⁷ See Cialdini, R. (2001) *Influence: Science and Practice* (4th edn.). Boston: Allyn and Bacon.

¹⁸ Herbert, S., (2006). *Citizens, Cops and Power*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press.

engagement might be important for the future of policing, and how effective mechanisms for facilitating this work might be established.

In framing such a discussion, it is useful to bring to the fore how police work routinely involves engaging with 'wicked problems' - that is issues where there is not an obviously 'right' solution, as some negative effects are ineluctably induced for someone. As such, questions of the distribution of these negative consequences and 'who bears them and when?' become important. It is in relation to such situations that strategic police-community engagement methodologies may have an important role to play.

Discussions of police reform over the past few years have been dominated by the twin themes of austerity, and issues of governance and accountability. The police service has been subject to significant reductions in spending and it is plausibly forecast that further cuts are likely. So far, many senior officers have adopted an austerity mantra that police simply need to learn to do 'more with less.' But there is only so much additional capacity that can be squeezed from existing assets. At some point there needs to be a reversal in the conceptual gearing from trying to do 'more with less' to doing 'less with more'.¹⁹ This involves accepting that:

- If there are going to be less police officers, then they will need to have more skills and be better equipped;
- And, there needs to be a shift to intervening less often in society, but ensuring that any action is more impactful.

Set against this backdrop of reduced funding for policing being the 'new normal', there will have to be some difficult decisions taken about how public-facing services are going to be redesigned, and potentially what the police are going to stop doing that they would have done in the past.

In thinking about how police organisations should negotiate and navigate these difficult decisions, it is important to acknowledge that the processes by which they are made will be vital in terms of their perceived public legitimacy and acceptability. Securing public permission for changing the delivery of core policing services seems to be integral to the continuation of the principle of policing by consent.

In sketching out this perspective, what I am seeking to accommodate is a recognition that it is not just the economic position of policing that has shifted over recent years, but also key normative assumptions about police governance. These are shifts that can be considered as part of a wider 'decline in deference' and reduced trust in public institutions more generally, but have a particular inflection in respect of policing. The introduction of Police and Crime Commissioners in England and Wales is a manifestation of this trajectory, but it reflects something deeper and more profound about how those who possess authority and power in social life should be held publicly accountable.

¹⁹ Innes, M. (2011) 'Doing less with more: The New Politics of Policing', Public Policy Research, June-August: 73-.

One way of thinking about how such movements can be understood is in terms of three key inter-linked and inter-twined developments in the guiding principles of police accountability:

- Seeing Like a Citizen – the first of these is that rather than police retaining the authority to define what is and is not important for them, they should integrate methods into their prioritisation processes that capture the relative impacts of different issues for sections of the public.
- Participative Policing – the second principle is that policing as an activity is not the sole domain of the police, and the involvement of other providers of community services (both formal and informal) is both necessary and to be encouraged.
- See Through Services – thirdly there is a much greater accent on the need for transparency in decision-making and delivery. In part, this is occasioned by a new media ecology, and the spread of social media and 24/7 broadcasting. But it also runs deeper than this in terms of a general expectation that public services should both give account to and take account of public views.

Taken together, what this points to is that there are a confluence of pressures in the environment that suggest that establishing effective strategic engagement channels will be an increasingly important aspect of how police negotiate the future. In thinking about what this might look like, it is potentially helpful to look at what can be learned and transferred across from other sectors in terms of how they have approached related challenges.

LEARNING FROM OTHER SECTORS: PUBLIC ATTITUDES TO GENOMICS

The ‘Public Attitudes to Genomics’ project (2002-2006) sought to better understand public attitudes to a range of genetic technologies. These technologies, ranging from GM food to cloning and genetic testing, represent a relatively recent but rapidly emerging field of scientific investigation and one that raises profound ethical, legal and social concerns. The idea underpinning the programme was that by better understanding public concerns and expectations it should be possible to leverage more effective governance of this area.²⁰

Especially relevant to the concerns of this report is that the ‘cutting edge’ nature of genomics research not only challenges existing protocols around confidentiality and governance, but is developing so quickly that consensus among scientific ‘experts’ about what “the facts” are and how they should be conveyed to the public is frequently lacking, leading to a form of ‘contested-knowledge’. This parallels aspects of policing, where rapidly emerging problems and issues often arise, and could be

²⁰ Sturgis, P., Cooper, H., Fife-Schaw, C. and Shepherd, R. (2004) Genomic science: emerging public opinion. In, Park, Alison, Curtice, John, Thomson, Katarina, Bromley, Catherine and Phillips, Miranda (eds.) *British Social Attitudes the 21st Report*. London, GB, Sage, 119-146. (British Social Attitudes Survey Series).

responded to in different ways, inducing disagreements and differences amongst senior police about what the 'correct' response is.

A second parallel with policing that can be identified is how public understanding of genomic science can often be governed more by 'science-fiction' than 'science-fact'. Thus a key aim of the research project was to understand what difference the communication of factual knowledge makes to public attitudes and why attitudes are sometimes ambivalent. Likewise with policing, there is a strong public mythology around what police do and how, that is influenced by mass media representations.

The research studies conducted under the auspices of the Public Attitudes to Genomics project brought together a range of quantitative and qualitative methods to address these kinds of issues. These included questions on a nationally representative survey, an experimental vignette study, focus groups and analyses of media coverage. Questions added to the 2010 British Social Attitudes Survey asked a representative sample of the public their views on different genetic technologies and reported on their permissibility in different contexts. The results found that some public attitudes have changed substantially over a recent time frame. For example, the public were far less opposed to GM food in 2010 than they were in 2003. Further research into this issue identified that public permission for genetic modification of food was higher when potential benefits were framed in terms of 'health' rather than 'commercial advantage'.

A key study within the project focused upon using an experimental panel design to test the effects of contested knowledge about genomic science on public attitudes. Two public panels received a 'knowledge intervention' in the form of a short DVD film, whilst a comparison group did not receive this information. There was little evidence that the communication of factual scientific information to the public changed their attitudes towards different genetic technologies, although its provision did significantly increase drop-out from the study amongst less educated respondents. This work fed into qualitative research to compare understandings and attitudes across three distinct groups:

- (1) General population;
- (2) People affected by, or at risk of, genetic disease; and
- (3) Interest or self-help campaigning groups.

The findings elicited suggest a complex picture of attitudes and influencers of attitude change. For instance, on the subject of human cloning, the public distinguished between therapeutic and reproductive applications of such interventions. The former was generally accepted when the benefits were clear, but it required considerable explanation because reproductive cloning dominates media coverage and the public imagination to such an extent.

In summary, the attitudes to genomics research shows that public views in this area are far from simple and are not straightforwardly malleable in response to the communication of expert or factual knowledge. Rather attitudes may be contingent on perceived risks and benefits in different contexts and, in the face of ongoing uncertainty, attitudes can be ambivalent, conflicting or changing.

Framed and interpreted in the context of police engagement with the public, several potentially useful insights can be gleaned:

- In respect of contentious and challenging issues simply telling people ‘the facts’ is not sufficient for securing public support;
- Dialogue and interaction with an issue, that is being engaged in deliberatively considering it, has beneficial impacts for some but not all groups in society. The reach of engagement is not uniform and will ‘touch’ some people more than others;
- Certainly where issues and knowledge are uncertain and contingent, the public perspective can flex quite considerably in response to emerging ‘real world’ events.

Of equal importance though, is how the approach adopted in respect of public attitudes to genomics is suggestive of a formal methodology that could be adapted and applied to systematically working out where public permission lies for different police tactics, as part of a wider agenda in respect of the public understanding of crime and policing. The particular advantage of such an approach would be that rather than trying to engage communities when something has gone wrong or in the wake of a crisis situation, it would develop a more proactive and preparatory concept of how strategic engagement could be operationalised.

More generally, the health sector is an interesting area for police to explore in terms of mechanisms of strategic engagement with the public. One such area for example might be the ethics committee and how deliberative forums are used to explore aspects of the practical implications of new innovations in medicine and medical technologies. It does not seem too much of a stretch to imagine policing organisations establishing adapted, yet analogous deliberative processes, to help navigate new innovations and issues. Although not necessarily narrowly focused upon the ethics of policing, some mechanism for bringing together senior police, those with independent knowledge and expertise and informed members of the public to deliberate upon possible new developments could afford considerable benefits.

‘PUBLIC PERMISSION’ STUDIES

Introducing a wholly unrelated study into this discussion is intended to illuminate how a politically and normatively contested area such as science policy is wrestling with, and attempting to solve, complex and challenging value-laden questions. The starting point for their policy development work was to first understand where public attitudes and opinions were, and how they might be influenced by particular alternatives. We could imagine an analogous process for policing, wherein contentious policy decisions are tested with members of the public. A carefully designed process could provide senior officers and others involved in the governance of policing with a robust evidence-base about where the thresholds for public permission lie in respect of particular police strategies, tactics and policies.

For example, if we take the currently politically ‘hot’ topics of undercover policing and the utilisation of intrusive surveillance technologies. Establishing a ‘public permissibility’ study on these issues would provide genuine insight about

the circumstances and under what conditions, the public would consent to particular options being deployed. We might expect that their permission threshold for tackling child sexual exploitation would be very high, but for other areas such as non-violent extremism, might be more contingent. At the current time senior officers are frequently invoking an imagined audience in trying to justify and account for contentious decisions that they have to take. The overarching legitimacy, accountability and consent for particular options could be considerably improved by being able to point to a robust evidence-base.

Conceived in this way, strategic community engagement becomes about more than just seeking to 'manage' crises and potential reputational damage that arises when police have to do difficult things. Rather, it becomes envisaged as a proactive undertaking designed to help senior police leaders and those in oversight positions to be able to understand where the boundaries of public consent are cast in respect of a range of key policing issues. Such an understanding would be of considerable value in helping them to frame policing policy, strategies and tactics that the majority of the public genuinely consent to.

CONCLUSION: THE PUBLIC UNDERSTANDING OF CRIME AND POLICING

Juxtaposing developments in genomic science and policing is perhaps not the most obvious comparison to draw, but it is instructive. For both are increasingly sites of political contention, where difficult decisions and choices have to be taken. A critical difference between the two domains lies in aspects of their respective knowledge bases. For in respect of public attitudes and expectations about science and scientific knowledge, there has been a concerted programme of work directed at understanding how public attitudes and expectations about science are formed and evolve in response to scientific advances. This effort is generically labelled the 'public understanding of science' (PUS).

Whilst there are well documented limitations associated with the PUS approach, compared with our understandings of how public attitudes and opinions in relation to crime, policing and criminal justice are influenced, the PUS studies provide a far more sophisticated infrastructure for scientific policy development. Really the closest equivalent that we have from Criminological research is the 'fear of crime' literature, and some growing work on public perceptions. But fundamentally this position is seriously constrained and neglects many of the issues about public opinions attitudes and perceptions, that those engaged in policy formulation would want to know.

What is needed therefore is the equivalent of the PUS approach for crime and policing. Positioned in this way, strategic community engagement work of the kind outlined across this report would be about providing police with an evidence-base to inform some of the difficult and consequential decisions that have to be taken. The case studies that have been introduced show aspects of the 'state-of-the-art' in terms of how strategic engagement is deployed from time to time, for certain 'politically hot' areas of business.

Mainstreaming these kinds of working so that they are moved from the state-of-the-art to become routine components of policing policy development requires a degree of formalisation. Looking across the case studies that have been outlined in this report, in conjunction with some of the relevant research findings from previous studies, it does seem possible to distil the key components for a formal methodology for conducting strategic police-community engagement. These would include:

- Recognition that strategic engagement can be used to direct the focus of police activity, but also manage its impacts.
- Acknowledgement that there are multiple partners and communities who can and should be engaged.
- Effective strategic engagement requires investment to establish and sustain it.
- There are different methods that can undergird different approaches to strategic engagement, ranging from survey based consultations through a formal group based meeting and on to far more highly participative deliberative forums.
- The new media ecology and the proliferation of social media technologies may provide new opportunities for establishing more dynamic and adaptive channels of engagement with the public. For example, recent advances in social media analytics could provide for a 365 24/7 'always on' dynamic community impact assessment, providing ongoing feedback of any public reactions to policing interventions.
- Strategic engagement may not be the same as democratic accountability. They may involve separate mechanisms and different focuses.
- The uses of strategic engagement mechanisms can evolve and adapt once such a capacity is established.

Fundamentally, thinking about strategic engagement in policing is important because the politics and economics of the police is changing. Public and political expectations about the accountability of police officers is changing. At the same time, the condition of austerity is manufacturing a situation where difficult choices are going to be required. What this report has tried to do is to show what some of the key ingredients for conducting effective and efficient strategic engagement are, and the benefits that can be realized. If the tradition of policing by consent is to be retained, then it will be important to establish ways in which the public can be meaningfully involved in helping to decide the future size, shape and focus of the institution of policing.