Engagement

This page is from APP, the official source of professional practice for policing.

First published 23 October 2013 Updated 23 October 2013
Written by College of Policing
21 mins read

Without the cooperation of the public, policing in developed democracies would become essentially unworkable. In simple terms, the police service would cease to function without the active support of the communities it serves.

Evidence has shown that effective community engagement, targeted foot patrols and collaborative problem solving can significantly increase public confidence in policing activity.

By improving public perceptions and increasing trust through fair decision making and positive public interaction, the police service can enhance its legitimacy.

Introduction

Research suggests that the way in which officers behave when engaging with the public helps to reduce crime by encouraging respect for the law and fostering social responsibility, making people more likely to help the police and not break the law.

As the effects on crime are largely preventive and rely on voluntary public cooperation, improved public engagement and encounters can help the police avoid the financial costs associated with enforcing the law, detecting crime and processing offenders.

Considerations

A structured approach includes the following factors:

- why the police need to engage with communities
- who the police should engage with in communities
- how to engage with communities

Community engagement

The process of enabling citizens and communities to participate in policing at their chosen level is known as engagement. This includes providing information and assurance, as well as empowering communities to identify and implement solutions to local problems and to influence strategic priorities and decisions.

Community engagement may be one-off or repeated over a long period of time. It can be formal or informal, focused on a specific issue or incident, on a neighbourhood, on service delivery or, more broadly, on policing strategy.

Service design and delivery

Community engagement should influence the design and delivery of services from the outset. This will assist the police to deliver services that meet local and individual needs the first time around, rather than later modifying existing services to better fit public expectations.

Engagement activity at this stage can have a positive impact on public satisfaction in policing, as it enables more inclusive and accessible services.

Core policing commitment

Engagement should be considered as a core element of police activity, informing – and having an impact on – every area of policing. A genuine commitment from leadership plays an important role in ensuring that public engagement is effective.

Leaders and senior managers need to commit the necessary staff time, effort and financial resources to engagement. This may include providing support and training for communities and staff, so that everyone can participate.

Why the police need to engage

Policing by consent requires public support for policing activity at every level. The purpose of engagement, as well as the level at which people and communities are to be involved, should be clear.

- Democratic mandate – This level of engagement sets the dominant philosophy for policing. The public have the opportunity to question and better understand the legitimacy of police actions and to hold the police to account for the effectiveness and quality of their services.
- Intermediate strategic – This includes engagement in policy, planning and critical incidents. Engaging communities at this level enables greater understanding of how policing may affect individuals and communities, either as part of equality analysis or to influence strategic priorities and decisions. This can be used to design and deliver effective and efficient services (see **community engagement**).
- Neighbourhood policing – This level focuses on securing community participation in relation to local priorities and problems. Neighbourhood policing has shown that public confidence improves when local people are involved in decisions about the issues that most concern them.

Engagement and police legitimacy

The impact of poor police and community relations on public perceptions should not be underestimated. Negative pre-existing opinions of the police are predictive of negatively received contact. Fair decision making and positive public interaction and engagement can improve these perceptions and increase institutional trust, thereby enhancing police legitimacy. This, in turn, helps efforts to reduce crime by encouraging greater respect for the law and fostering social responsibility, making people more likely to help the police and not break the law.

Neighbourhood policing should build relationships and provide opportunities for the public to participate in problem solving. For further information see: **Tuffin R, Morris J and Poole A. (2006). Home Office Research Study 296: An evaluation of the impact of the National Reassurance Policing Programme**.

Police effectiveness

In encounters with the police, research indicates that the quality of the treatment received is more important than the objective outcome. However, while personal treatment appears to be valued over criminal justice outcomes, an inadequate police response to an incident may have a significant impact on the confidence of the community. See **critical incident management**. The ways in which the police engage and interact with the community, as well as the negative and positive experiences of the public when accessing policing services (including victims, witnesses and offenders), can influence subsequent **perceptions of police fairness** and legitimacy, and

confidence in the police.

The perceived legitimacy of particular policing functions can be increased if community engagement contributes to evidence-based policy making.

Perceptions of police fairness

Fairness and the perception of fairness are key to police legitimacy, and to encouraging or discouraging effective engagement with communities. It is important that fairness is demonstrated in all aspects of policing, including arrests, disposal decisions and the resolution of incidents. The following example illustrates the perception of police fairness in response to the use of stop and search.

Stop and search example

National levels of the disproportionate use of stop and search remain a cause for concern, and this has had a negative impact on Black, Asian and minority ethnic community confidence. Communities support the use of stop and search provided that forces can demonstrate legality, necessity, proportionality and accountability, and that the search is based on the best information available.

Next steps is a diagnostic tool, implemented by the EDHR Unit within the College of Policing. It ensures that forces use stop and search efficiently and effectively. It also encourages a proactive marketing of the power to local communities, and appropriate and effective use of the power targeted at issues of concern to local communities. At the same time, it exposes inappropriate and ineffective use, in particular, when this is having a detrimental effect on community confidence.

For further information on next steps contact the **EDHR unit**.

Benefits of effective engagement

Evidence has indicated that the potential benefits of effective community engagement include:

- an increase in public perceptions of safety
- a tendency towards a reduction in disorder and anti-social behaviour
- an increase in confidence and trust, and in community perceptions of the police (see **engagement and police legitimacy**)
- an improvement in police officers' attitudes and job satisfaction

All of these benefits can have a positive impact on the ability of the police to tackle crime and anti-social behaviour.

Achieving results

These benefits can be achieved by:

- improving information gathering to help identify underlying problems or tensions within communities
- increasing the quality of local intelligence through building relationships with communities (see **intelligence management**)
- identifying responses and strategies that may not have otherwise been considered
- fostering community involvement – responding to community concerns and improving public satisfaction by designing and delivering services that meet public needs

Effective management of engagement

This ensures policing is informed by, and accountable to, local communities at all levels, from neighbourhood-focused problem solving to strategic **decision making**. Poor management causes problems similar to those of **failing to engage** at all.

Community engagement is a business practice that should have an impact upon every level of policing. For engagement to be effective, the organisation should focus on the needs of citizens. It should also be committed to ensuring that the results from engagement are integrated into service design and delivery, and that communities are involved in that delivery.

It is important that engagement activity has a clear purpose and is effectively planned and delivered. Above all, both the police and communities need to have clearly defined roles and be given the skills, information and resources to carry these out.

Community participation requires the police to share some degree of power with the public. This can range from simply giving information about crime, anti-social behaviour and police activity in the area, to empowering citizens to take control of the policing resources and budget in their area.

Training

Community engagement involving direct interaction between officers and the public is likely to be successful only if officers are adequately trained and prepared for the role. Tasks that may not

appear challenging, such as running a public meeting, require specific skills. Additional staff may be required and can be generated through reallocation, from partners or by support from volunteers.

Failing to engage

In England and Wales, the problem of community alienation from the process of policing was highlighted by the disturbances in the late 1970s and the Brixton riots in the early 1980s. Community engagement strategies have developed as a result of reports into these disturbances.

Lack of engagement can contribute to an intelligence void in high-profile incidents or critical incidents, and this was evident during the disorder that broke out across the UK in 2011. This void can be filled with negative information about the police, which can affect community confidence. Use of social media by the public means that this can happen very quickly. The police need to respond accordingly (see police use of digital and social media).

Risks associated with ineffective engagement include, but are not limited to:

- a loss of public confidence in the police
- a loss of legitimacy in the eyes of the public (see **engagement and police legitimacy**)
- a negative impact on strategic policing, as the police are unable to predict changes in community profile, needs and priorities
- increased vulnerabilities around threat, risk and harm
- withdrawal of the public from participation and problem solving, leading to services that are less responsive to the needs of the public and require increased policing resources
- unrealistic public expectations regarding policing services
- lack of awareness of changes in the community and tensions not being identified, leading to a negative impact upon tactical policing

For further information see **HMIC. (2011). The Rules of Engagement: A Review of the August 2011 Disorders**.

The confidence cycle

The confidence cycle is the link between community engagement and increased public confidence in the police. It can facilitate a greater willingness for the public to cooperate with the police,

thereby enriching **intelligence collection**.
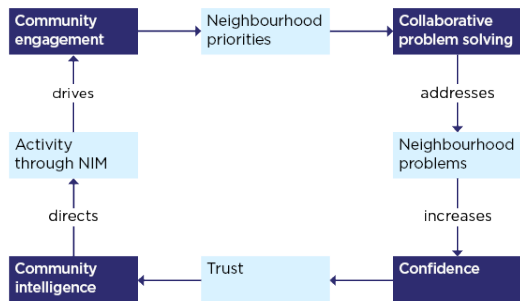
Using engagement information

Information obtained from engagement with the community helps to formulate intelligence on issues that affect neighbourhoods and can be included in strategies for policing local communities. This should include information from day-to-day policing activities, social media or investigations. Engagement and intelligence gathering mechanisms should be joined up and aligned with wider strategic processes such as **tasking and coordination**.

Information from the community should help decision making within the national intelligence model (NIM) process, which can highlight emerging issues at the tactical tasking and coordination group (TT&CG), and can change the way in which staff are tasked.

Information from the community can include:

- community problems and priorities
- details of crime and disorder
- changes in tension between different communities, or between people within the same community
- threat, harm, risk and vulnerability
- incoming and outgoing communities
- critical incidents

Whom the police should engage with

All community members have a stake in the provision of policing services and should have the opportunity to understand and influence them. Voting for a police and crime commissioner (PCC) is one way in which every person can influence the policing service they receive. Information and engagement about policing services and how to access and influence them should be designed to

reach all members of local communities. It is important to look beyond representative or community groups to ensure that engagement reaches **seldom-heard community members**, so that they are involved in decision making and local activity.

Service and policy development decisions about engagement should take into account the nature of the issue and the groups of people who are most likely to be affected. At this level, engagement includes the need to engage ex-offenders in identifying the most effective means of preventing their reoffending through integrated offender management. Identifying the information that is already available from data, previous research and engagement helps to determine where the gaps in evidence or intelligence are, what needs to be discussed and with whom, in order to focus engagement activities. At a neighbourhood level, engagement is often a longer-term process, adapted so that communities can access, influence, intervene and provide answers to local policing problems and solutions.

For further information see:

- APP on **prosecution and case management**
- **Local policing and confidence online resource (neighbourhood policing)**

Neighbourhood priorities

Community profiling is created by local officers' understanding of the risks, threats and vulnerable people within their communities, and assists in identifying who to engage with. Engagement may identify concerns of local people and gaps in crime or anti-social behaviour reporting, or may be used to encourage participation.

Understanding communities

Online technology and communications has had a profound effect on the way in which communities interact. This is creating a shift from understanding communities as solely limited to geographical areas towards communities of shared interest or background. In understanding the complexity of communities, it is important to understand the ways in which people network, communicate and interact, and how this influences the formation of communities in both geographic and virtual terms.

Engagement strategies need to take account of these different types of community so that they can be adapted according to the community.

Neighbourhood profiles

Creating neighbourhood profiles can be an effective way of compiling a range of police and partnership data to assist in the understanding of neighbourhoods and the people living and working in them. Neighbourhood profiling should enable police and partners to identify areas of risk, community tension, and vulnerable individuals and groups, which can then be targeted and issues addressed through collaborative problem-solving activity.

Factors affecting communities

Positive or negative experiences affecting a community, or controversial issues in an area, can affect police public relations or relations within communities. Understanding issues affecting communities can highlight where initial special measures may need to be put in place, such as increased community engagement or community cohesion work with partners to bridge interpersonal distances between police and communities.

For further information see **NPIA. (n.d). Community Cohesion Guide.**

Creating neighbourhood profiles

The initial process of creating neighbourhood profiles should form part of the engagement process for neighbourhood teams. This process assists in:

- helping the police to understand the complexity of their local community – identifying which group or groups people associate themselves with
- identifying when, where and how neighbourhood teams are going to engage with those groups over a rolling 12-month period
- being flexible enough to recognise new or emerging groups that teams need to engage with on an ongoing basis
- understanding how particular groups choose to communicate, and targeting engagement appropriately

Case study

Thames Valley Police use customer insight data to move away from expensive and inefficient public relations and media campaigns towards two-way, local engagement and communications. Research and analysis of community feedback has been triangulated with Experian MOSAIC

data, crime and anti-social behaviour data and local knowledge to suggest effective and ineffective engagement methods for residents. Experian's MOSAIC database used census data overlaid with data sources from commercial data sources and public attitude surveys to provide geodemographic profiles at the finest possible geographical level. This approach has been used to provide a strategic step-change in how Thames Valley Police communicates and engages with the public, enabling effective, targeted engagement through customer insight.

Community impact

Local situation awareness allows the police to gauge feelings of tension and vulnerability in the community, and to predict factors that are likely to affect it. It takes into account general feelings of vulnerability and insecurity, as well as economic, political and social factors that have an effect on a community. It can be developed through proactive community engagement, environmental scanning, collating and analysing community intelligence and information, and competent call handling and interrogation of computer recording systems.

For further information see ACPO. (2011). National Community Tension Team: Community Assessment Guidance [Restricted].

Community impact assessment

The purpose of a community impact assessment (CIA) is to identify issues that may affect a community's confidence in the ability of the police to respond effectively to their needs, thereby enhancing the police response. It helps to inform forces about long-term plans to rebuild community confidence and learn lessons for the future. CIAs should be carried out efficiently and should accurately record the effect that the incident has had on the community. When asking for a CIA, the following should be considered:

- what information is required and what it will be used for
- who can provide the information required and who will oversee the work
- how long it will take to complete

An effective CIA may also:

- provide enhanced investigative assessment and an understanding of all aspects of the incident being dealt with

- identify vulnerable individuals and groups
- provide an assessment of community confidence in police response
- develop community intelligence

CIAs should be regularly reviewed and recorded, to take into account emerging issues. These may involve cross-border considerations (for example, where an incident takes place in one area and the family lives in another).

The threat, risk and harm to communities

An understanding of factors contributing to vulnerability should enable proactive identification of – and improved responsiveness to – threat, risk and harm within communities. Vulnerability should be based on the individual and interpreted in the widest sense. A common sense and pragmatic approach should be taken. Personal circumstances are also a factor – for example, how often a person is subject to, or a victim of, crime or anti-social behaviour, and any adverse impact that it has had on their health, lifestyle, personal safety or quality of life.

The ECHR Inquiry into Disability Related Harassment has identified the need for police forces to understand the potential for disability to be a particular factor that can contribute to the vulnerability of victims or witnesses. It is essential that mechanisms are in place to identify and respond to vulnerable victims of crime (for example, hate crime) and anti-social behaviour. These mechanisms, supported by ongoing community engagement, can improve police capabilities to identify and provide an appropriate response to vulnerable victims at an early stage (see **case study: Fiona Pilkington**).

Risk assessments

Risk assessments to identify vulnerable or repeat victims should be carried out at the first point of contact and/or first response. They should also be updated throughout subsequent contact to identify the support and activity that both the police and their partners can offer to individuals.

Information sharing

In order to ensure that police forces and their partners respond to vulnerability within communities and are able to intervene at an early stage, there must be robust mechanisms and protocols for information sharing between police and partner organisations in place. These enable joint tasking and ensure a seamless, holistic response to the needs and safety of victims and witnesses.

Factors

Some of the factors and situations that should be taken into account in identifying people who may be vulnerable include, but should not be limited to, the following.

Health and disability

- learning disability
- physical disability or illness
- mental health needs
- drug and/or alcohol misuse

Equalities and discrimination factors

- gender and gender identity
- sexual orientation
- ethnic background (including language)
- age
- disability
- religion or belief

Economic circumstances

- deprivation or financial concerns
- unemployment or poor education
- poor housing conditions (including geographical location)

Personal circumstances

- those who themselves are vulnerable
- social isolation
- poor social skills
- history of offending
- self-neglect
- overcrowding

- those who are affected by anti-social behaviour

Family circumstances

- child protection
- children in need
- children in care
- domestic abuse
- family members or carers with mental health, drug or alcohol problems
- family members or carers with a history of offending

How to engage with communities

Methods of engagement tailored to meet the needs and preferences of the community will enable them to fully participate and ensure that the most cost-effective, efficient channels are used. For neighbourhood level engagement, decision making needs to be devolved to allow beat officers flexibility in tailoring approaches.

Barriers to engagement include social exclusion, location, concerns over privacy, access and low confidence in the police. Those affected by these issues, as well as people with protected characteristics (defined by the **Equality Act 2010**), should be encouraged to participate in planning and choosing engagement approaches. They should also be provided with advice on how to overcome these barriers.

By scoping the public participation mechanisms that already exist, this helps to identify where people who cannot be reached through traditional means but may already be engaged with statutory or voluntary sector partners or other areas of policing. Drawing on the skills and networks of statutory partners, voluntary and community organisations can help to achieve higher participation and better outcomes, make better use of resources, reduce the burden on participants and tackle quality-of-life issues that the police alone cannot deal with.

Communication plans

These should be used to ensure that information about engagement events and opportunities are available and accessible to those being targeted.

Care should be taken to ensure that people are involved before key decisions are made, and that they continue to be engaged throughout the decision-making or problem-solving cycles. This gives greater value to people's contribution and makes engagement meaningful for all those involved. It also ensures that results are communicated, and that greater trust and confidence is instilled in the process.

Legal framework

The police should take account of the **Data Protection Act 1998**, **Human Rights Act 1998** and the **Freedom of Information Act 2000**.

Police Reform and Social Responsibility Act 2011

Section 1(8) e – PCCs. The chief constable is accountable for the effectiveness and efficiency of engagement with local people.

Section 14 – arrangements for obtaining the views of the community on policing (amends section 96 of the Police Act 1996). States that the views of the people in the police area are to be sought in particular circumstances, namely before a PCC or the Mayor's Office for Policing and Crime issues a police and crime plan or precept.

Section 17 – duties when carrying out functions. An elected local policing body must have regard to the views of people in the body's area about policing in that area.

Section 34 – engagement with local people. A chief officer must make arrangements for obtaining the views of people within each neighbourhood about crime and disorder, and must make arrangements for providing such people with information about policing in that neighbourhood.

Localism Act 2011

Localism Act 2011 – gives communities and individuals new rights, making it easier for them to achieve their ambitions for the place in which they live.

ECHR, equality and the duty to engage

The **Equality Act 2010** brings together and extends equality law in a single piece of legislation, repealing the various pieces of anti-discrimination legislation previously in force.

Part of this Act bans unfair treatment and helps to achieve equal opportunities in the workplace and society.

There is also a duty on public authorities to ensure that there is equal treatment of people with protected characteristics. In circumstances where people with disabilities need reasonable adjustments to enable them to have an equal opportunity to contribute to engagement activities, these must be provided. Reasonable adjustments ensure that people with disabilities do not face barriers in accessing opportunities. Public authorities must take reasonable steps to avoid putting people with disabilities at a substantial disadvantage, to remove or adjust barriers that might have this effect, and to provide auxiliary aids and services.

Public sector equality duty

This new single duty replaces the separate duties under the old legislation. See **section 149** of the Equality Act 2010.

Although there is no explicit legal requirement to engage with people who have different protected characteristics, public bodies are required to consider all individuals when carrying out their work, and to understand how different people will be affected by their activities. The duty requires public authorities to have an adequate evidence base for their decision making. Engagement can assist with developing that evidence base by helping forces to build their policies on evidence, rather than on assumptions.

Public authorities covered by the specific duties need to publish information to demonstrate their compliance with the public sector equality duty. This could include details of their engagement as part of decision and policy making.

Accountability and transparency

Democratic accountability

A major aspect of the police-reform landscape is to increase the democratic accountability of the police and the ability of the public to hold the police to account over the provision of service delivery. This increased accountability is supported by greater transparency of information, making information available to the public regarding crime and anti-social behaviour in their local area. The policing activity to tackle it is intended to empower communities to participate in influencing service delivery.

Case study

The national crime and local policing information site **police.uk** gives the public access to information about local policing, crime and information within communities in a way that allows them to raise issues or take an active role in tackling crime and anti-social behaviour. Local crime maps are included and these are updated monthly using new data from police forces. This is part of a longer-term programme that will see other crime and justice information (such as court progress and convictions) being published alongside crime maps.

Force level accountability

The election of PCCs is intended to increase the democratic accountability of the police at a force level as the PCC will hold the chief constable to account on the public's behalf.

Neighbourhood-level accountability

The **Police Reform and Social Responsibility Act 2011** introduced a legal requirement for chief constables to engage with their local communities. This requires police officers within each neighbourhood to hold regular meetings with local people, during which the public can hold the police to account on matters relating to policing in their neighbourhoods. These meetings should be supported with information about crime and anti-social behaviour in the local area, as well as the action that the police and partners are taking to tackle it. This means that the public have sufficient information to be able to provide feedback at the meetings and hold the police to account for what they are doing locally.

Engagement feedback

Engagement should involve a two-way dialogue with communities. Feedback should be given on the outcomes of engagement activity that includes:

- what the results of consultation or engagement are
- actions taken as a result of consultation or engagement
- if no action has been taken, the reasons for this

Publishing engagement information (for example, methods used, participants and findings) should be considered as part of the information made available to the public.

Levels of participation

Community engagement needs to be effectively implemented to ensure that community participation occurs at all levels of policing. This can be at the neighbourhood policing level (for example, neighbourhood-focused problem-solving initiatives), at a strategic level (for example, influencing the recruitment and assessment of police officers) and at the democratic mandate level (for example, key strategic priorities and administrative decisions, and monitoring complaints against the police).

The level of participation (see **accountability and transparency**) will vary between community members and by the level at which the public are engaged (democratic, strategic or neighbourhood). This could range from receiving information only, to full citizen control of local service provisions. Only a few will have the skills, willingness and time to sit at the more intensive end.

Evidence suggests that, in moving towards increasing community control, the level of input required from the police and partner agencies decreases. For example, as capacity increases in communities, the police may be able to adopt a more supervisory and enabling role.

Local communities sustained participation requires:

- training for both police and community members
- officers dedicated to specific neighbourhoods
- police supervision and support

Many tasks associated with community engagement (for example, running and administering public meetings or auditing local disorder) can be performed by community volunteers. For example, the most effective beat meetings are often chaired by community volunteers.

For further information see:

- **Skogan WG and others. (2000). 'Problem solving in practice: Implementing community policing in Chicago**'.
- **Skogan WG and others. (1999). 'On the beat: Police and community problem solving**'.
- Sadd S and Grind R. (1994). 'Innovative neighbourhood oriented policing: An evaluation of community policing programmes in eight cities'. In: Rosenbaum D, ed. 'The challenge of community policing'.
- **Garcia L. (2002). 'Determinants of citizen and police involvement in community policing**'.

Tags

Engagement and communication