

Chapter 5

Evaluating the Ability and Desire of Police and Crime Commissioners (PCCs) to Deliver Community-Oriented Policing in Practice



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The Police and Crime Commissioner (PCC) model of police governance and accountability was established in England and Wales in 2012 in an effort to realise an ethos of community-oriented policing. The new PCC model promised to replace the ‘invisible and unaccountable Police Authorities and make the police accountable to a directly-elected individual who will set policing priorities for local communities’ (HAC 2016, p.3). The Police Authorities, in use since 1964, were part-time committees of councillors and magistrates who were expected to hold chief constables to account but were widely considered to be amateurish, unorganised, ‘unaccountable, uncontactable and frankly unknown’ (ibid, p.17–18). Under the watch of Police Authorities, police forces had reportedly lost sight of the community-oriented function of public policing and had become ‘disconnected from the communities they serve’, ‘bogged down by bureaucracy’ and answerable ‘to distant politicians’ (HAC 2010, p.3). Although they regularly adopted the rhetoric of ‘community-oriented policing’, chief constables and their subordinate officers were criticised for continuing to under-appreciate the individual and collective senses of insecurity within the community by attaching too much weight to their own policing expertise (ibid).

The PCC model, in contrast, promised a return to community-oriented policing, which holds that civilians should be able to ask a police force to amend the conduct of its police officers, the deployment of its resources and its strategic and tactical policies in order to address community needs, wants, concerns and complaints (Manning 1978). Communities should be able to regulate the exercise of police discretion by encouraging police officers to narrow their exercise of discretion in areas of growing community concern or by applying a wider degree of discretion in

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areas where hard policing tactics are perceived to be unfair or counterproductive (McDaniel 2017). Community-oriented policing requires police officers to be tolerant and sensitive to differing views and cultural, political and economic values espoused by multiple cultures (Loader and Mulcahy 2003). Every individual within a neighbourhood should be treated as a valued and distinctive service user, each with their own distinctive crime problems and resident concerns (Brogden and Nijar 2005). A community-oriented ethos should enable the police organisation to realise the ideal of 'policing by consent' and the traditional Peelian principle that the 'police are the public and the public are the police' in a pragmatic way. The police organisation should ultimately be able to point to local community consultation to explain, substantiate and validate their strategies, tactics and conduct (Manning 1978; Bayley and Shearing 1996; Walsh 1998; Jackson et al. 2012).

The appointment of a directly-elected individual to hold each police force to account was considered necessary to put police oversight back into the hands of the public, to counteract rising crime rates, and to reverse the tendency of some police forces to treat low-level offending with scant regard (Caless and Owens 2016). The ethos of community-oriented policing was so central to the new PCC model that it was embedded within the Police Reform and Social Responsibility Act 2011, which established the PCC model. More particularly, the Act held that the PCC, when carrying out any statutory functions, 'must have regard to the views of people in the body's area about policing in that area' (2011, s.17.1). Moreover, section 14 (amending s.96 of the Police Act 1996) states in no uncertain terms that '... arrangements shall be made for each police area for obtaining the views of people in that area about matters concerning the policing of the area, and their co-operation with the police in preventing crime in that area and for obtaining the views of victims of crime in that area about matters concerning the policing of the area'. A document referred to as a 'police and crime plan' was placed at the centre of this process. The Act held that 'the police and crime commissioner for a police area must issue a police and crime plan within the financial year in which each ordinary election is held' and that the plan must be issued 'as soon as practicable after the commissioner takes office' (2011, s.5.1 – s.5.4). The plan must set out: the commissioner's 'police and crime objectives' for crime and disorder reduction in that area, and the means by which the chief officer's performance will be measured, amongst other aspects (2011, s.7). It required the PCC to make arrangements to obtain 'the views of the people in that police area, and the views of the victims of crime in that area, on that plan' (ibid). The PCC, in turn, was to hold the chief constable 'to account for the exercise of the duty ... to have regard to [the] police and crime plan' (2011, s.1). The police and crime plan was so central to the new model that one PCC stated that the only circumstances in which he would have considered using his powers of dismissal was if the chief constable had 'strayed from the police and crime plan' which would mean 'the force is not doing the job we are expecting it to do' (HAC 2016, p.13). Another PCC added that if his chief constable was asked to define his job in one sentence, he would say that 'I deliver the police and crime plan' (ibid, p.7).

An evaluation of the police and crime plans published by the Greater Manchester, the West Midlands and the London Metropolitan PCCs between 2013 and 2016 indicates that PCCs are embracing the ethos of community-oriented policing on face value. The police and crime plan for Greater Manchester for 2016/17, for example, states that the PCC will ‘seek and reflect the views of the public and particularly victims of crime in setting policing priorities and holding the chief constable to account for the performance of the force’ (2016, p. 21). The PCC also promises to investigate whether ‘local policing and other public services operate in a way that is relevant to local communities, with an understanding of their needs and concerns’ and whether the force has ‘done its utmost to provide good customer care and levels of service’ amongst other issues (ibid, p. 30–33). The plans for the West Midlands and Greater London use similar language throughout. The plan for the West Midlands (2015a, p.8), for instance, promises that communities will be put ‘first’, while the London Mayor’s Office for Policing and Crime (MOPAC) promises to greatly ‘enhance’ neighbourhood policing (2013, p. 23).

Under ambitious headings such as ‘increasing public confidence’, ‘reducing crime rates’, ‘creating more prosperous communities’ and ‘creating a new era in policing’, one might expect that more practical, community-focused issues would be captured, explained and addressed within the police and crime plans. However, and quite remarkably, the police and crime plans do not get much more specific than this. Although PCCs typically arrange daily meetings or calls with their chief constables and receive summaries of crime occurrences and case progression, the plans contain no real mention of specific crimes which are inflicting particular neighbourhoods. Objectives such as: ‘we will reduce burglary by focusing on the areas suffering from this crime ... [and] we will ensure that our communities are satisfied with the service they receive’ lack specific details to guide police officers or members of the public (WMPCC 2013, p. 2–7). The plans are almost entirely devoid of specific workable information. The deliverables and objectives are not even close to being clear enough so that they can be broken down into tasks which are achievable and subsequently delegated to units who are capable of achieving them. More broadly, the police and crime plans do not contain crime reports, crime maps or threat assessments of local crime, terrorism, organised crime or cyber-crime. The benchmarks for public confidence, satisfaction, reporting, recording, complaint and inter-agency collaboration around victims and mental health are also largely generic. Not only are the PCCs’ intentions vague but almost no attempt is made to translate aspirations into actions, methods or means (McDaniel 2018). The West Midlands police and crime plan, for instance, claims that the neighbourhood policing team emphasise ‘consistency’, ‘continuity’, ‘engagement’, ‘communication’, ‘visibility’ and ‘community-led initiatives’, ‘neighbourhood watch’ and ‘developing specialist staff’ but without the accompaniment of specific details these statements are little more than value-free rhetorical clichés. The West Midlands Police, for example, was found by the Independent Police Complaints Commission (IPCC 2014) to be mishandling 8 out of 10 cases relating to allegations of racial discrimination but no attempt was made to address this through a revised version of the police and crime plan. Bland statements such as ‘we will ... continue our review

of Force management and leadership’ do not indicate whether and to what extent specific problems are being rectified (WMPCC 2015a, p.24).

Most importantly, there is limited evidence within the police and crime plans to suggest that the ‘deliverables’ are actually based upon community needs and wants. The plans make no clear attempt to pinpoint the concerns of particular neighbourhoods or reconcile a cross-section of views. When challenged by the Home Affairs Committee (2016), various PCCs admitted that they simply do not have the resources to communicate directly and effectively with the public. The police and crime plan for London (2013, p. 18–19), for example, stated that it was premised by and large on a town hall meeting in each of the 32 city boroughs which involved no more than 3000 people as well as an online survey, focus groups, forums and ‘hundreds of written responses and ... scores of community groups’. Moreover, MOPAC (2015) reported that it had received only 2470 enquiries from members of the public between April 2014 and April 2015. With a population of over eight million people, the involvement of only a few thousand people does not appear to amount to a representative sample or significant engagement in community consultation. Similarly, it was not unusual for monthly meetings of the West Midlands PCC’s ad hoc Strategic Policing and Crime Board (2016) to report that ‘there were no questions from the public or petitions received’.

Caless and Owens (2016), who conducted interviews with 23 (of 41) PCCs with a view to shedding some light on the attitudes of PCCs towards issues of police governance, community engagement, collaborative working and social media, were particularly critical of the attempts of PCCs at grassroots consultation. They found that PCCs who relentlessly engage in public encounters, whether face to face or through social media, do so ‘merely to have more people recognise them and understand what they do, if they are lucky’ (2016, p.148). They argued that the impact of social media work is particularly questionable since none of the PCCs they interviewed had considered ‘surveying the impact of their social messaging ... and whether or not the PCCs social messaging is reaching large numbers of young people’ (ibid, p.137). They found that, in reality, serious commentary about society, the fear of crime and personal unease hardly figured in social media largely because the purpose of social messaging sites was about ‘having fun and unwinding’ (ibid, p.147). They concluded that the PCCs ‘conviction that this is worth it sometimes borders on the desperate...’ (ibid, p.148). Similarly, Lister and Rowe (2015) found that ‘...there are recurring questions over how the results of such consultations are interpreted and thereafter translated into practice’.

In terms of performance benchmarking, section 12 of the Police Reform and Social Responsibility Act 2011 requires the PCC to ‘produce a report (an “annual report”) on the exercise of the body’s functions, and the progress which has been made in the financial year in meeting the police and crime objectives in the body’s police and crime plan’. The data should reflect a true picture of the needs of the constituent communities and enable the persons who live in the area to assess the performance of the police organisation. Unfortunately, the annual reports are similarly vacuous. The West Midlands PCC (2015b) reported, for instance, that public place violence with injury had increased by almost 11 per cent (1048

offences) compared to 2013–2014, yet no explanation was provided for this increase and no immediate form of remedial action was identifiable. Similarly, no attempt was made to explain why there had been a ‘step change up’ for some crime occurrences, whether ‘stable’ crime occurrences were acceptable and what the PCC was planning to do about such developments (WMPCC 2015b). In addition, public confidence was reported to be at 82% and satisfaction with service was at 82.8% in 2015 but no attempt was made to explain why almost 20% of the population did not have full confidence in the police (ibid). In Greater Manchester, the ‘Report of the Chief Constable to the Commissioner for Greater Manchester’ (2013) told quite a different story to the PCC’s annual report of the same year. The PCC did not attempt to explain the reasons behind or convey the chief constable’s explanation for a ‘significant’ 19% increase in crimes of theft from the person; a ‘significant’ increase of 18% in sexual offences; a ‘significant’ increase of 10% in incidents of anti-social behaviour or the fact that only 23% of victim-based crimes had been solved in the previous 12 months (ibid, p.4–9). The chief constable, however, presented these figures and tried to explain the reasons behind them in his report, whereas the PCC’s (2013) annual report did not mention many of the issues. In comparison to the chief constable’s report, the PCC’s publication was considerably uninformative and arguably misleading.

The lack of proactive public engagement on the part of PCCs is lamentable considering the fact that voluminous academic research indicates that it is not unusual for some communities to be systemically averse to community-police dialogue out of hostility and distrust caused by prolonged periods of over-policing, abusive practices, perceived prejudices and generational neglect (Scarman 1981). Unfortunately, the Police Reform and Social Responsibility Act 2011 is silent on the forms, frequency and methods of community-engagement which PCCs should employ. Whether and to what extent a PCC engages in wide reaching consultation or communication remains largely a discretionary decision, unique to each individual PCC. In the absence of a more structured apparatus, it would appear that section 14, which requires the PCC to obtain ‘the views of people in that area about matters concerning the policing of the area ... and the views of victims of crime in that area’, is only being paid lip-service. Lister and Rowe (2015) found that some PCCs will engage in a measure of community consultation ‘rather hurriedly’ and only when they are required to do so ‘shortly after coming into office (i.e. once every four years)’. Similarly, the Stevens Commission (2013, p.81) found that ‘there is little evidence to indicate ... that PCCs are engaging successfully with diverse communities across their constituencies’.

Instead of realising the ethos of community-oriented policing in practice, it would appear that various PCCs are pursuing the interests of ‘public relations’ over and above ‘community relations’. ‘Public relations’, in this context, involves the promotion of a superficial public image of policing whereas ‘community relations’ involves learning about the needs of minority groups and adapting police procedures to provide a reassuring police service for all (Banton 1973; Mawby 2002). The interviews carried out by Caless and Owens (2016) indicate that PCCs are cognisant of the power of superficial ‘image work’. One PCC told them that ‘...thinly attended

meetings in cold village community centres don't do it for me. I'd rather be filmed talking to someone in a shopping centre or in a town square. Better visually and better in terms of media attention' (ibid, p. 145). Another interviewee said that '... what the audience doesn't see is that his [the PCC's] message is the same each time (I could certainly repeat it word-for-word): hold cops to account, reduce crime, increase and support neighbourhood teams, reassurance, cut anti-social behaviour, cope with budget cuts, prevent crime, care for the environment and the rest...' (ibid, p. 152). One chief officer eloquently surmised that the PCC 'seems to find it hard to step outside his restatement of the clichés that got him returned to office ... what he hasn't got across to the public is what he has actually achieved in any of his platforms' (ibid, p. 203).

As Mawby (2002) conveys, police forces should be image conscious and engage in image management but such 'image work' must be based on the ethical and effective conduct of its police officers during interactions and engagements with the public rather than a fictitious presentation of policing which is designed for public consumption. The presentation of a fictitious account of police performance and community attitudes in place of police-community partnership inevitably leads to perverse forms of policing and police governance. Statements such as 'I represent the voice of the public', 'I am the voice of the people' and 'I represent all the people' can lead to the self-promotion of PCCs' personal virtue ethics and political ideals, absent of wider community consultation and representation. A degree of self-grandiosity amongst PCCs was identified by Lister and Rowe (2015) who examined the election statements of all 41 successful candidates and found that only 58.5% of the statements mentioned 'consultation with the public', which is one of their primary statutory responsibilities. They concluded that 'there was no evidence in the election statements of [some] incoming PCCs that such a discussion was even anticipated' (ibid).

The indicative result is that there does not appear to be sufficient community input, leading to commensurate community-oriented outputs. The apparatus appears to be wholly inadequate for the purposes of community consultation. Communities are arguably having a negligible effect on the shape and form of police policies and priorities as a result. Nor are PCCs presenting the public with fulsome and regular assessments of outcomes and evidence of their impact on community crime problems. The participatory and deliberative conception of policing, which was initially hoped for, appears to have been replaced by the tendency of PCCs to employ language and rhetoric within their plans which presents a politically desirable image of discursive policing but without the substance. Vague mission statements like 'we serve our community' and 'we listen to our citizens', which were traditionally employed by chief officers to the frustrations of civilians, have simply become the preserve of another remote political vehicle. The police and crime plans would appear to be little more than a reflection of the PCCs' own social philosophies rather than clear community-led initiatives which can guide and shape the form and style of police activities and civilian interactions. Instead of establishing clear means which can be measured and assessed, which the 2011 Act demands, PCCs have done little other than creatively wrap up these basic requirements within

a number of ambiguous themes and rhetorical clichés. The frequent absence of specific, tangible actions and considerations appears to reflect a lack of seriousness of PCCs towards their statutory responsibilities and community-oriented policing more broadly. It is submitted that the wide disparities between the police and crime plans and police developments on the ground; the lack of improvement over time and the absence of community consultation serves to fundamentally discredit the PCCs' claims to community-oriented policing in reality.

Conclusion

Rather than heralding a new era of explanatory accountability, it appears that the 'communicative gap' which exists between the police and the communities they serve is widening (Loader and Mulcahy 2003). The dominance of the PCC's personality appears to recreate many of the problems associated with the professional police attitude of the 1970s. PCCs, like the chief officers and police authorities before them, now appear to believe that they know what is best for the community without actually asking. The ethos of community-oriented policing, which was developed in the 1970s to explicitly counteract this professional police mindset (Manning 1978), has spawned the very form of insular police governance that it was designed to counteract. The experiment has been reduced, by some PCCs, to little more than a superficial public relations exercise which promotes an assumed degree of civic participation but without the substance. Rather than building strong police-community relationships through communication, transparency and accountability, PCCs appear to be relying primarily on the individual and positional power granted to them by statute to give policing the veneer of community-oriented policing rather than the reality of it.

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