Intensive Engagement

21ST CENTURY COMMUNITY ENGAGEMENT

Enabling 'a new mode' of local policing and place-based public safety?

ABSTRACT

This paper describes a high-level operating model for local policing, working explicitly as part of a preventative system. Working through themes of people, problems, and places we draw out implications for local leaders – in policing and other sectors – and the importance of effective community engagement as a key enabler of efforts to deliver public safety.

Richard James, Stephen Carr and Andy Higgins

21st Century Community Engagement: enabling 'a new mode' of local policing and place-based public safety?

This paper is one of a series describing thoughts and views on a model of community engagement that is truly forward facing and can support leaders of place to rise to the unprecedented challenges of the coming months and years.

Previous articles have described the opportunity to effectively harness and build the capacity, latent within every community, to tackle new and entrenched challenges. Examples have included evidence-based methods and mechanisms that should be a part of any modern engagement framework. We have suggested ways in which technology can support vital face to face encounters between public servants and local people, and the importance of delving deep to ensure that all voices can be heard. Now perhaps more than ever, we need to support and include vulnerable people to address deep-rooted issues and reduce demand and strain on public services.

In this latest paper Richard James, Managing Director of Intensive Engagement, Stephen Carr, Transformation Strategy Lead for the Home Office, and Andy Higgins, Research Director of the Police Foundation, build on the findings of the Police Foundation's *Strategic Review of Policing in England and Wales* to describe a high-level operating model for local policing, working explicitly as part of a preventative system. Working through themes of people, problems, and places we draw out implications for local leaders – in policing and other sectors – and the importance of effective community engagement as a key enabler of efforts to deliver public safety.

Strategic Review of Policing

The Police Foundation's *Strategic Review of Policing in England and Wales,* published earlier this year, was a rare chance to think about the long-term and the big picture. It began by looking at how the world is changing: the so called 'mega-trends' – technology, climate breakdown and societal shifts (like complexifying social need and an awakening to neglected forms of injustice) – and the implications these will have for public safety and policing over the next few decades. It identified clear signs of an emerging mismatch between our territorially bounded, essentially reactive, 'analogue' policing model and the complex, borderless safety threats that now confront us: exploding online fraud with miniscule detection rates, victims of serious crime disengaging from police investigations, and eroding levels of public trust and confidence that threaten to undermine our consent-based tradition.

While all of these have been exacerbated by Government funding decisions and the public sector austerity of recent years, the Review came to view this is an accelerant rather than the

underlying cause of a faltering service. The fundamental problem, it concluded, is a sociological, rather than financial or managerial one: the world has changed, and our policing model has not yet caught up.

Such big themes and macro-analyses can easily draw focus away from the local. In a globally interconnected and digitally enabled world, the importance of *place* – the crucibles of context that determine how these big shifts play out at an everyday level – can easily be overlooked. As might be expected for an exercise of this kind, the report's recommendations mainly fell on policing's 'big beasts' (the Government, chief constables, PCCs and institutions like the College of Policing) who can shape long-term strategy at the national level.

But the Review's analysis also holds important implications for local leaders – in the police, but also in other public services, spiritual and faith organisations, and the commercial and third sector – who have a role in promoting public (or 'community') safety and resilience *somewhere in particular*. This article begins to explore the Review's findings through a local lens.

Place matters

The Review advocates for a national policing model with a strong local dimension. It resisted the perennial calls for large-scale force mergers or a single national police force, because of the way this would inevitably compromise local focus, relationships, knowledge, and accountability, stifle innovation and hinder partnership working. There is a convincing case that the strong orientation towards local communities, provided by neighbourhood policing and Community Safety Partnerships during the early part of the Millennium, was instrumental in improving public confidence in the police, and that their dwindling has contributed to its decline. It is also clear, looking at the experience in other countries, that these local connections inevitably get diluted in large-scale, centralising reform programmes.

So, the Review argues that foundational policing services: 24/7 response, neighbourhood policing, local partnership prevention work, safeguarding and offender management, should remain as police force-level functions, while back-office departments and specialist support should be reconfigured at regional or national levels to concentrate expertise and improve efficiency, with the savings reinvested back into local service delivery.

It also seems possible (probable even) that under such a model, the locus of operational autonomy could shift downwards: away from the police force-level, towards more local (e.g., BOCU/CSP level) sub-divisions, with leaders at this level being best placed to engage in visible public dialogue and lead work, with Local Authorities and others, to tackle local problems. We see that as no bad thing - but draw attention to the premium the shift would place on *place-based* leadership skills, and how they are developed, supported, selected for, and valued within the police service. Such skills enable leaders to better understand
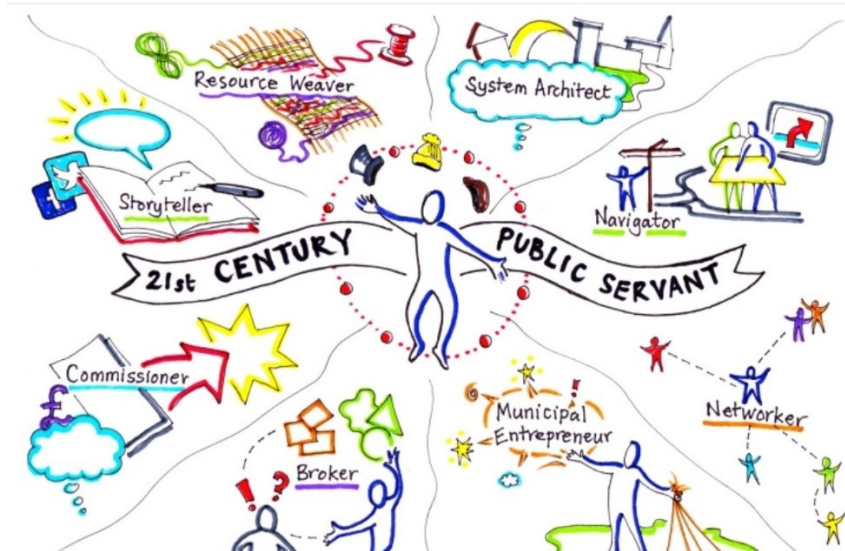
community dynamics and make sense of the unique complexities of local public service delivery structures. They also make for local policing that is better attuned to community tensions, can understands historical influences and is sensitive to political and cultural behaviours. They allow leaders to recognise the importance of stability – and the need to 'stick around' to develop well-functioning partnerships – one of the greatest challenges for policing in a fast-changing operating environment.

Leadership as a key capability

The Review concludes that to prepare for a future operating environment characterised by complexity, contest, and rapid change, leadership at all levels needs to be prioritised as a key strategic policing capability, with more explicit attention and investment devoted to police leadership development and support.

Places are where complexity, contest, and unpredictability play out. Despite intrinsic variation and their unique local contexts, we need to imagine all of our future places as suffused in digital, more susceptible to exogenous disruption (for instance from extreme weather, pandemic disease, or geopolitical fallout) and inhabited by people who are increasingly (and rightly) insistent on being treated decently in life, as well as by some whose acute needs cannot be met by any one of our traditional public service agencies. They will also be the venues in which sophisticated organised criminals exploit vulnerability, manifesting as street-level violence and disorder and as hidden abuse. In such places of complexity, the notion of the leader as the 'expert' at the top of the tree with all the answers will become increasingly untenable.

Police leadership styles are changing but the Review identifies an over-reliance on a hierarchical, command-and-control mentality, which can be exacerbated by short-term, tactical imperatives to 'deliver performance'. Future places – and future workforces – will require 'transformational', rather than 'transactional' leaders, who prioritise collaboration, relationship building, empowering and motivating others, and 'cultural' development, over maintaining 'grip' and an assumption of deference to directives. These skills and competencies echo the more entrepreneurial qualities needed for modern public services leadership, as identified in the 21st Century Public Servant report summarising the research inspired by the University of Birmingham Policy Commission on the Future of Local Public Services.

In the following sections we start to unpack what this means at the local level, using the Review's analysis of the police role as our point of entry.

What are the police for?

The main, over-arching conclusion arising from the Strategic Review is that the profound period of social change we are living through necessitates a radical rethinking of our public safety arrangements; a *"new mode of protection"*, as Sir Robert Peel put it in previous but equally transformative times. Given the range and complexity of public safety threats confronting us as a society, our fundamentally reactive, territorially constrained policing model – even with its extant set of inter-agency relationships – faces an insurmountable *capacity challenge*. In other words, there is simply too much demand for the police, even in partnership, to deal with adequately, and the cracks are beginning to show in the form of worsening detection rates, response times, victim satisfaction and public confidence ratings. Without a significant paradigm shift, this will only get worse.

The Review offers a two-part response to this challenge. First, it calls for a radical, whole-society reorientation towards prevention. At the national level this would mean a cross-departmental government strategy and a new national Crime Prevention Agency. At the area level, the work being pioneered in Violence Reduction Units can be expanded and there is more that can be done to enable deeper collaboration between local services, including simplified local governance and greater alignments of funding streams. At the local level, there is also a need to clarify and reinvigorate the role of Community Safety Partnerships and to ask some challenging questions around their current contribution. If partners are developing innovative community safety models in different places, then this needs to be understood, if they are not, then leaders may want to rethink their levels of investment and coordination.

But these are the structural enablers: at the level of day-to-day delivery, in the real places where strategies hit the ground, prevention needs to become a default mindset for all those who deliver local public services. But as we shall see, this is an intricate multi-dimensional transformation, and it is the job of leaders to grasp it and translate it into 'culture': *the way we do things around here*.

The Review's second response to the capacity challenge, is to call for greater clarity about what *role* the police should play, within society and, in particular, within this more expansively and explicitly formulated public-safety system.

It might seem surprising, given what has been said above, (and the precedent apparently provided by the Peelian Principles), that the Review did not decide to formulate the police function in principally preventative terms. Doing so, it concluded, would leave policing open to too great a risk of overstretch and overreach: putting seemingly limitless social activities within scope. Equally, it rejects the simplistic view of the police as just "crime fighters".

Rather, the Review decided (drawing on Egon Bittner and a [paper commissioned from Professor Ian Loader](#)) to ultimately root its assessment of the role of the police in the police monopoly on the legal use of force, and the utility of that power (whether discharged or not) for imposing provisional solutions to immediate circumstances of disorder, conflict, and public safety risk. This is, above all, what the police are for, because it is what only they have the powers to do.

That is not to say (as we elaborate later) that this is *all* the police should do, and it is certainly not to imply that those without warranted powers cannot contribute to the police mission: policing's 'allied professionals' – be they forensic experts, data scientists, call handlers, community safety officers, or indeed its many volunteers – do and will make a huge contribution. The point is, that the unique powers that we invest in our police agencies, should provide a crucial anchor-point when it comes to thinking through where that mission should start and end.

Prevention level 1: people

First and foremost, then, the police role is to respond to public concerns about imminent danger and to use their skills, diplomacy, powers (or the presence of them), equipment and authority to bring about a safe resolution. But, along with practitioners in all agencies who deal with people who are in need or at risk of coming to or causing harm, police officers should, wherever possible, fulfil that core reactive function *with a preventative mindset*.

This means looking forward from the current incident and making preventatively informed decisions about how best to resolve it. It may mean referring the individuals involved to other

agencies who can provide ongoing support and reduce the risk of recurrence, it may mean instigating a criminal process to deter, rehabilitate or reinforce the rule of law, or, alternatively, to diverting offenders away from formal sanctions or initiating restorative processes. And it should always mean seeking to leave an attitudinal legacy, such that those involved are more likely to behave in co-operative, pro-social and ultimately safer ways in the future (but more on this later).

So, that's the *people* part of the equation, police officers performing their essentially reactive, powers-based role, but using the contact points that arise from it, to instigate or support *individual-level* 'person-centred' preventative interventions (which might, for instance, include ongoing police involvement in safeguarding or offender management casework, but will usually involve referrals to other better-placed providers).

From this, a set of implications emerge for local leader's: the importance of working collaboratively with local partners to develop effective service options and referral pathways that meet local needs; of incubating a culture of preventatively informed, discretionary decision-making amongst frontline staff who can consistently set people on appropriate pathways; and of building a concern for the long-term health and welfare of a place and its people into the way business is done every day.

Prevention level 2: Problems

But that is not the full extent of the police function, and the Review builds out further and more enthusiastically from first principles than Loader does in his paper, concluding that the core function described above (rooted in the unique possession of exceptional power) can only be performed effectively and legitimately if the police do other things as well.

For instance, police powers (applied or implied) will only be effective in maintaining order if they are attached to a criminal sanction – so, the police also need to investigate crime, gather, and weigh evidence, and prepare submissions to the CPS to ensure that these are applied appropriately and justly.

Again, however, decisions about *which* crimes to investigate and whether to prosecute, divert or disrupt, need to be made with a *preventative mindset* – as well as with regard to victim needs and to securing justice. Additionally, police can also anticipate where their powers are most likely to be needed, or where their presence could provide immediate preventative deterrence, and target their deployments and activity accordingly.

So now we are moving away from reactive *people work* and starting to think in terms of proactivity and *problems*. Herman Goldstein famously identified problems – the specific sets of circumstances that underlie and give rise to multiple instances of crime, disorder, and safety

risk – as important objects for police attention, and there is [strong evidence](#) that structured efforts to identify, understand and intervene in these problems can be an effective form of prevention. Policing is not just about waiting for 'problem noise', (particular instances of disorder or danger) to occur and then reacting, it also includes the active down-stream management, minimisation, and mitigation of problems to quieten their intensity.

Problems aren't always geographically anchored, (particularly in a digital age), but very often they are (they are usually about the proximate circumstances that lead to potential offenders and suitable targets coming together, *somewhere,* in the absence of capable guardians) and because problems are very often place-specific, understanding them – or enabling them to be understood – is an important job for place leaders. This is situated knowledge work, and so local leaders need to be managers, developers, and custodians of relevant local knowledge. But they also need to be curious. They need to care about cause and effect; about the evidence-base and 'what work's', but also about context and complexity and unpicking the unique and [intricate problem-knots](#) that only to apply 'here'. To lead a place involves knowing it deeply and to never tiring of knowing it better.

It is important to note here, however, that neither the police nor anyone else, have a monopoly on defining local problems, or on producing problem-knowledge, nor do they have all the solutions – in fact the 'standard' police toolkit (hotspot patrols, proactive operations and investigations etc.) is relatively limited. When it comes to tackling problems, the most effective and imaginative interventions often come from work involving multiple participants (partner agencies, local businesses, charities, and citizens etc.) in forming a rich, multidimensional picture of the problem and working out how to unpick it together. Local problem-oriented-public-safety-making, therefore, needs to be intrinsically collaborative: it involves engagement, dialogue, and relationship building, and this is (again) where leadership comes in, in developing a 'culture' where this comes as second nature.

Prevention level 3: Places

Third, we also need to recognise that both individual-level need and risk, and the locally textured problems that give rise to particular risky incidents, arise from contexts – that is, out of the more 'general', sometimes 'intangible', conditions that exist in a place, and that can be more or less conducive to, or protective against, crime, harm, and risk. We know for example that [poverty and crime are connected](#), and that [collective efficacy](#) or [community cohesion](#) (concepts relating to the strength of the bond between neighbours) can be protective.

Local public services (and others) can play a preventative role by shaping these 'ambient', contextual conditions, and the police can contribute, specifically and importantly, by establishing and maintaining *legitimacy*.

Legitimacy, technically put, is the recognition of the right to hold power by those subject to it as well as by powerholders themselves. It is linked to (perhaps a necessary precursor for) public confidence and, for policing in a democracy, it is both a moral imperative and demonstrably pragmatic, in terms of encouraging citizens to co-operate, accept decisions, reject violence, and obey the law. In other words, legitimacy is preventative: it is conducive to safe, pro-social public behaviours and supportive of police efforts to maintain public safety and order.

A strong body of Procedural Justice research now firmly links peoples' legitimacy judgements, to their perceptions about the fairness and decency of the treatment they receive during police interactions, and although some have challenged the stronger claims about the causal links between treatment and legal compliance, a 'softer' version, focussing on the value of civil, co-operative relations between police and communities for bolstering safety and resilience, remains highly compelling.

This is particularly relevant given the disrupted future operating environment that the Review (and others) predict, where novel public safety threats (floods, heatwaves, disease, resource shortages, cyber-attack etc.) are more likely to emerge at short notice, requiring police – on the sharp edge of the front-line, as always – to lead a whole-society response. Just look at the way policing needed to quickly affirm a co-operative, consensual, 4E's approach during the recent Covid crisis. It is for this reason (among others) that the Review identifies legitimacy as perhaps the most important strategic policing capability that the service needs to protect and develop during the coming period.

Reflecting on the Covid experience highlights another important aspect of legitimacy; the way it links to discretionary decisions about where, when and whether to use (those role-defining) police powers, how recourse to them can be minimised, and how the police can avoid falling into hard-power traps, where consent and co-operation break down and force – en*force*ment – becomes the only available option.

Related to this, revisions to police legitimacy theory have sought to broaden thinking from interactional fair process, to also included notions about 'bounded authority' (roughly the proportionality of power use) and distributive justice (the fair sharing of the costs and benefits of policing) as well as concerns for police legality and effectiveness. All of this means that we need to think about (strategic and operational) discretion when we think about legitimacy: about police decision making, priorities and the *where, when and whether* of power use, not just about its style of deployment. And doing that – identifying priorities and continually refining and debating the rationale for decision making – means engaging in *dialogue* with the people those decisions affect.

The Review argues that a police service that is connected to communities, has deep local knowledge, strong relationships, channels for dialogue, a developed sense of place – and of the cultures and concerns of people who live in and use them, will make better decisions about whether and how to exercise power. This is why it places particular emphasis on community policing as an essential police function: because it enables police to use its powers (that ultimately define its role and purpose) in more effective and legitimate ways. But it can only do this if that community policing provision is accompanied by sufficient 'organisational transformation' to give locally embedded practitioners, (and their local leaders), a chance to stick around and get to know the place; to personally invest (and become invested in) meaningful partnerships, and to be given a say in how the other policing activity that affects their area gets done.

So, police legitimacy helps to build resilient places and needs to be considered not only (as 'public confidence' sometimes is) as an objective in itself, but as an important aspect of prevention as well. This is a trick conspicuously missing from the UK's current violence reduction strategy, with its twin-track focus on upstream prevention and surge policing: surely recognising that communities play a vital role in resisting violence and that their relationship with the police and other public services is a crucial enabler, is the missing leg of the tripod?

For local leaders, we believe that recognising the importance of legitimacy, means supporting and embedding community policing and being willing to tirelessly discuss, explain and listen. But it also means working to embed an organisational culture of ethical conduct, in particular, by ensuring principles of fair process and decency are embedded *within* organisations – in the way staff are treated and in how they treat each other (so called organisational justice) – as well as in the interactions employees have the public. Finally, it means choosing tactics very carefully. There may be a place for stop and search or Live Facial Recognition in 'problem level' proactive interventions, but these may come at a detriment to legitimacy that can make them counter-productive in the long run: they must be handled with extreme care, accompanied by dialogue and with attention to the long-term health of place.

Interdependencies

So, this is where complexity of mission, not just of operating environment, really kicks in. People, problem, and place level prevention efforts are intrinsically interconnected. Discretionary decisions about individuals can fuel or alleviate problems. Reactive order maintenance and criminal investigation (if carried out with the right mindset) can generate knowledge that helps build problem-level understanding. The public contact points that this work generates leave attitudinal traces that can bolster or erode legitimacy. Proactive problem-level interventions can mitigate and manage local safety risks but, if tactics are poorly chosen,

can have harmful, detrimental impacts on individual futures, and on the co-operative propensities of communities – but the antidote to this is engagement and inclusivity in defining, understanding, and unpicking the intricacy of local problems, and crucially, we know that when the police engage communities in exactly this kind of shared problem-solving work there is a [pay off in terms of legitimacy](#) as well.

Local leadership then is about working the interplay of the levels: it is a fiendishly complex, multi-dimensional chess game where the attacks and gambits, successes and setbacks on one board, simultaneously boost or undermine progress on others, in either complementary or contradictory ways. Every game, in every place, is different, but there are qualities, skills and behaviours that typify successful players. A non-exhaustive list emerging from the preceding analysis includes:

- A proactive commitment to the long-term health and well-being of place, and to the communities and people who live in and use them, and a recognition of the importance of prevention and resilience-building in securing this.
- Attention to collaborative system-building, and to developing a shared understanding of how the distinctive roles played by individual agencies, combine to form a preventative public safety system that is more than the sum of its parts.
- A commitment to developing a rich, inclusive, and enduring knowledge of place, and of the people and problems that exist within it, through engagement, relationship building and dialogue, as well as analytics.
- An awareness of the complex potency of coercive power and of the responsibility to use it with informed discretion and in the context of dialogue.
- Internal and external commitment to fairness and inclusivity, recognising that behavioural decency flows from it, and the value of this for supporting collaborative safety-making and resilience.
- And perhaps above all, nurturing an organisational (and multi-organisational) culture of empowered, discretionary decision making, where much of the above becomes the default way of working.

This may all sound rather idealistic; divorced from the realities of managing short resources while responding to targets and inspection regimes and the day-to-day crises that beset local leaders. We are unapologetic about this, offering it in the spirit of the Review's long-term vision, and in the context of its full set of enabling recommendations. Some of these – a cross government crime prevention strategy with a new agency to deliver it, and new Directors of Crime Prevention, working directly to PCCs – acknowledge that many of the solutions to our

public safety challenges lie outside of policing. Others – a regional rationalisation of police back-office functions, and a step change in police Continuous Professional Development - recognise that policing also needs structural and cultural reform.

But so much for the future. We believe that there is a need, *now*, to understand and anticipate the shifting demands on our leaders – across all sectors of local public service delivery. Are we developing leaders equipped with the skills, attitudes, and capabilities to operate in this more integrated and consultative fashion? At this local level there is a need, now more than ever, to develop a more inclusive approach – both amongst leaders and within communities; to develop 'fit for purpose' community engagement frameworks that can reap the benefits of local resources; to cultivate leaders who can work better together to understand their role within unique operating contexts and to support the development of community informed and community-built solutions. A model of 21st century Community Engagement.

About the Authors

Richard James, Managing Director of Intensive Engagement, spent 30 years working in policing; he is a highly experienced police leader, having led significant force-wide change programmes and commanded events of national significance. Richard provides advice and support to police forces, local authorities and third-sector organisations who are seeking to develop and implement effective engagement strategies that harness community assets, surface valuable insights and increase participation. He recently spent time working with eight EU policing agencies examining effective community policing practices and exploring the benefits that technology can offer. Richard continues to work alongside academic institutions to research, test and implement evidence-based practice.

Stephen Carr is transformation strategy lead for the Home Office. He was formerly programme manager for the Welsh Government's Safer Communities Programme – aimed at refreshing and reinvigorating community safety partnership working across Wales – following his work leading the Welsh Government's Working Together for Safer Communities Review. As head of community safety for Cardiff between 2006 and 2012, he led the Safer Capital community safety partnership and the development and implementation of the 2010 Tilley Award-winning Transforming Neighbourhoods model of multi-agency neighbourhood management programme, and is now a judge for the National Problem-Solving programme and annual Tilley Awards

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