

EXPLORING THE RELATIONSHIP BETWEEN PERFORMANCE MANAGEMENT AND COMMUNITY POLICING

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This Paper reports on a Small Project Grant awarded by SIPR to Dr Alistair Henry (University of Edinburgh / SIPR), Dr Simon Mackenzie (University of Glasgow / SCCJR) and Tony Beveridge (then in charge of the Safer Neighbourhood Teams, Lothian and Borders Police; currently Tayside Police). Matched funding was provided by the Scottish Centre for Crime and Justice Research (SCCJR) and the research project was nested in a Knowledge Exchange programme with the police funded by the Arts and Humanities Research Council under the title 'Community Policing in Scotland'.. The research, involving 29 interviews, was carried out between June and September 2010.

Summary: This small scoping study was designed to document and assess the initial trial of the Safer Neighbourhood Teams (SNT) model in the south and east Operational Command Area of the Lothian and Borders A-Division. The study examined the organisational and cultural challenges created by the reform; assessed officers' perceptions of the adequacy of their training; reviewed how the SNT model facilitated partnership working and problem-solving approaches; and explored whether existing performance management systems were capable of accurately capturing and guiding the work of the SNTs. Major findings and recommendations are reported.

INTRODUCTION

Following the Justice Committee of the Scottish Parliament's Review of community policing and community engagement in Scotland, Lothian and Borders A-Division set up a Project Team to review practice and make recommendations for reform in this area of operations. The Project Team recommended that existing community policing capacity (primarily including Community Beat Officers, Neighbourhood Action Teams and School Link Officers) be consolidated and reorganised into more integrated community-facing teams. These teams would be designated Safer Neighbourhood Teams (SNTs). The SNT was also to provide a novel form of priority-setting with community groups being asked to select the problem-issues they would like the SNT to devote time to. A prototype of this new model of community policing was established in the south and east Operational Command Area (OCA) in March 2010 before it was extended throughout A Division in September.

Performance Management

Of interest to this research were the measures laid-down to evaluate the SNTs for performance. Performance management is a crucial issue as it works in a number of ways to organise activity within the force, set the agenda for what objectives to aim for, and validate what should and should not be done.

In the past, performance management regimes based on Key Performance Indicators and Police-generated analysis were frequently the source of academic criticism and seen as baring responsibility for some of the failings of modern policing. It was often argued that KPI's brought about unintended consequences for the police, dragging attention towards areas of quantitative focus such as response times, solvency, hours of foot patrol etc., at the expense of public service (Hughes and Rowe, 2007: see also Golding and Savage, 2008, Martin, 2003). It became established in the police that "what can't be measured doesn't count and what doesn't count doesn't get done" (Hough, 2007, .p.204).

A 'performance' mindset is often to the cost of community-orientated policing with things like relationship-building, partnership-working, and community consultation overlooked in preference to crime-focused statistical returns. As such, developing a performance framework around a community policing project must be particularly sensitive to the damaging cost of mistaking internal police meters of success with local public approval.

Aims

The focus of research was to document and observe the performance framework in place within the SNT prototype. Research was to cover not only the formatted and standardised means of evaluating SNT activity, but to reveal the methods of evaluation that were important to practitioners working within the SNT strategy.

The aims of research were to: Identify the factors that are relevant to working SNT officers, police management and council management when evaluating SNT activity; and examine whether these means reflect an appropriate and systematic format for identifying SNT progress.

Internal Police Management

As with any police activity, the SNTs have brought with it a number of numerical indicators to provide managers with a tool for performance reporting and surveillance, chief of which was to be “public confidence”. Police management receive input of confidence data via “Your Police” Perception Surveys and local council Annual Neighbourhood Surveys.

Public confidence is seen as the end goal for SNTs, with activity to be geared around establishing and servicing trust and confidence in the community.

For officers working within the SNTs, “public confidence” has no practical meaning for them. It is a far-removed notion that management has to worry about and it provides little in the shape of guidance or direction for practical application. As such, “Public confidence” is viewed largely as a wishful by-product of any SNT work as opposed to a meaningful driver or organiser of activity.

Officers reported no indication of “confidence stats” having a working influence over how SNTs think about their task in practical terms. Furthermore, the managerial value of such data to decision-making is questionable in any regard. The return of either positive or negative confidence feedback does not inform a manager of the merit of activity taking place under their command. Confidence stats do not transmit meaningful information of “what officers do” to management level or drive progressive decisions for how to organise activity.

Under normal circumstances, and without specific community or councillor complaints, management often rely on traditional statistical indicator regimes and established ‘police science’ to gauge team performance. These indicators may be of statistical or managerial interest only and are often potentially at odds with less crime-centric community-policing principles.

While the SNT strategy attempts to perform to novel and unique performance measures, it is naturally born into a police force with previously established modes of evaluation. For Lothian & Borders Police this includes the Measuring Our Performance Reports (M.O.P), the Performance & Activity Management Process (PAM), Scottish Policing Performance Framework, and the analyst-supported Tasking and Co-Ordinating (TAC) process. These measures place value in traditional indicator thinking by looking solely at quantity of incoming calls, solvency, category 4 crime rates etc.

Managers are encouraged to be stat-aware at all times and statistical performance is important to in-house reputation. While target-setting is not a part of the SNT model, police statistical data-collection still influences SNT activity in such a way that the SNTs can get involved in work of statistical and managerial interest only.

So for example, if vandalism stats suffer, SNTs will be expected to draw the stats up to a less-alarming level. This reflects managerially-decided “acceptable” levels of solvency that are often only relevant to managers and in competitive reference to comparable command areas. It draws the SNT towards the insular measures of success and occupies SNT time with in-the-field stat concerns.

Lessons from the past have shown that ‘highly’ performing forces in police-created statistical terms do not necessarily match community approval (Fielding and Innes, 2006). The lesson is that over-investment in the ‘science’ of police barometers of success can cause the police to drift from community interest and show a stronger interest in crime-centred community policing tasks.

What is more is that 'Police Science', such as the TAC process, narrows police-attention to crime-related incidents at the expense of important and alternative duties that are of particular relevance to community officers. The TAC process is highly valued and heavily relied upon by SNT officers and management as a means of generating work. The issue with this is that the TAC process over-values crime-related and incident-driven data, against the value of time and dedication spent developing local knowledge and partnership building. As noted by Mackenzie and Henry (2010), the role of the community officer is increasingly one of a knowledge-broker to a range of statutory, voluntary and private sector problem-solving agencies.

Over the years police management has developed a reliance for using stats as the tool of agenda-setting and performance surveillance and whilst the SNT is explicitly trying to sidestep those old habits, it is nevertheless the case that the new intentions lay side by side with the established regimes that has preference for crime-orientated tasking.

Council Auditing

As part of the City of Edinburgh's part-funding of SNT officers, the council were entitled to audit the SNTs for activity indicators. Consequently, Lothian & Borders Police produced activity Summary Reports that all SNT officers are obliged to submit monthly.

The Summary Reports contain a combination of quantitative data (such as number of hours spent on patrol, number of community council meetings attended, number of SID entries recorded etc.), supplemented by a "Qualitative and Contextual Information" section where officers record narratives of any other work they performed under the banner of the SNT.

Summary reports are of a diminished relevance to Officers as they receive no feedback on the content of their reports, as well as being sceptical of its value to reflect the merit of their job.

For officers, the summary reports do not act as a format where their work can either be validated or reviewed. Reports are filled out dutifully, shipped-out to the council monthly and then never heard of again. From the perspective of officers, the reports are not supporting an ongoing conversation of review and feedback between the police and local council. As summed up by one officer (re: Summary Reports) – "I've never been told if what I do is right or wrong. I just assume it isn't".

The council likewise question the value of certain indicators and find more use (in practical terms) in the exchange of qualitative and contextual data.

For local government management, the numerical indicators might provide shorthand for the achievements of the SNT but in practical terms it is far more important to exchange qualitative information.

To give an example, indicator-sections such as 'Alcohol' provide the Council with limited useful information. Any information to be gained about local alcohol-related issues can not depend on the recording of numbers in Summary Reports but relies on the ongoing familiarity between the two agencies, the established working relationships, and the sharing of pertinent qualitative information. It is the strengths of these properties that satisfy council approval of the SNT, not observation of indicator data.

The transmission of data from the police to the council via the Summary Reports short-changes not only the work performed by SNT officers but also the value of analysis the council can meaningfully perform. As emphasised by both the police and council, it is the 'Qualitative and Contextual Information' section that transmits the information of value. Clearer and more consistent guidance on what is expected to be provided in this section would enhance the investment of the council in evaluating SNT work

Community Consultation

The SNT model piloted the use of local priority-setting meetings, however establishing appropriate groups to represent the community has been more difficult than imagined.

The SNT strategy aims to tap into public community groups to decide on SNT priorities. Groups are to be offered a number of police-recognised issues (usually around ten) and select three for priority-attention. These priorities and the general work of the SNT are to be subsequently reviewed over successive meetings.

In practice, it has been more difficult than imagined to identify suitable and willing community groups to take an interest in police issues. In some cases pre-existing community groups with issues tangential to policing, such as area-environmental concerns, have been adapted into “Community Safety Groups” to accommodate the priority-setting format.

As a result, some SNTs have found it difficult to identify a community-group of the right ‘fit’ for their purposes. This has limited the number of meetings that have occurred, as well as diminishing the value of meetings, as attendees are still in the process of learning what exactly is being asked of them. In the interim the police take the lead in shaping and deciding priorities.

The value of this format would be better suited for evaluation after allowing for a ‘bedding-in’ period.

Partnership-working

A number of agencies share interest in some of the very issues that are of priority to community-minded policing – anti-social behaviour, neighbour disputes, traffic issues, environmental standards etc. The SNT strategy includes a commitment to work with a number of partner organisations and as such it should follow that partner-organisations have a say in evaluating SNT performance.

At a practical level, partnership-working relies on the quality of working relationships established at frontline positions. Amongst SNT officers there is varying scale of progress made by officers in learning a working knowledge of other agencies as well developing their own point-to-point contacts within organisations.

The value of partnership insight to SNT work is directly related to the value SNT officers place in pursuing and developing inter-organisational co-operation. The initiative is left to SNT officers to service their own partnership skills and as officers develop their organisational ties and knowledge (which varies between officers) the more the conversation between police and partners is opened up and becomes worthwhile.

The officer outside the performance framework

The performance framework in place provides limited indication of what is expected of officers and the core learning of the role is out-with the procedural format. Neither the Summary Reports, “public confidence” nor the range of other indicators set out in the SNT strategy practically informs SNT officers as to how they should perform their role. As such, clarity of the role is always an issue and officer development takes place largely outside of higher-management sight.

The SNT project has sizeably bolstered the ranks of the “community-facing” police (often nearly trebling personnel). SNTs have drawn-in significant numbers of officers who have little-to-no experience of community policing. This is an issue in light of how officers differ in what they understand is valued in community policing.

There is a noted difference to how officers experienced in the community-facing role talk about the job as opposed to newcomers. To put it in very general terms, officers new to the role rely on the traditional ideology of the police expertly enforcing crime control, while the more experienced appear more interested in relationship-building.

Officers fresh into the role tend to place more of an emphasis on enforcement and confrontation. The role is often talked about in crime terms with the role providing the opportunity for more effective tackling of criminal issues and problem individuals. Newcomers are more likely to mention and value things like drug-busts, crime investigation, SID entries, improving statistical performance, targeting problem-youths, helping out the response teams, responding to the radio etc. - All the “fun stuff” of policing.

While this may be relative ‘normal’ police attitudes, it is suggest that it has heightened relevance for officers new to the community-facing role. Newcomers to the SNT all report a significant gap of clarity as to what their job entails, questioning “what exactly do I do?” As such, officers will fall back on their own assumptions as to what the role is that typically plays to prevailing police ideologies of tackling crime and enforcement.

This is markedly different from how officers experienced in the community-facing role talk about their job. Experienced community officers rarely brought up crime at all and what was valued most by these officers was their attachment and government of their territory. By this is meant the extent to which they are familiar with residents in the area and have established personal contacts within the agencies of community-action (the council, environmental wardens, housing association etc.)

Experienced officers have the know-how, confidence and trust established to busy themselves renewing contacts and relationships within the community and its cornerstone organisations.

Peer learning is a vital source of direction and practical advice for officers, often shaping what is encouraged as community policing within a SNT.

It is also worth noting that many officers are more inclined to seek guidance and advice from peers as first port-of-call. As much as the performance framework is overvalued in its capacity to direct officer activity, peer learning is *undervalued* in its importance.

The many officers (and Sergeants) coming off response into the community position have had to look to the more experienced community officers as to what is expected of them and what they should do. The more experienced have become *de facto* “experts” in the community role and in particular fields of expertise such as youth trouble, vandalisms, community meetings, traffic management, housing association work etc.

Inexperienced officers reported a reliance on their peers to help guide them through the early days of uncertainty and many have taken the chance to shadow their colleagues. Peer support can also mean being introduced around the community, introduced to people in partner organisations and handing out practical advice on how to tackle certain problem-issues.

Encouraging officers to take greater advantage of the knowledge and standing of their more community-experienced peers may help mitigate some of the early-day anxieties.

MAIN FINDINGS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

- ‘Public confidence’ is limited in its usefulness as a meaningful indicator of performance because it does not (in its present form) clearly specify to either police management or SNT officers how Community Policing (CP) should be operationalised.
- The continuing relevance of statistical regimes at managerial level, as well as the daily reliance on the TAC process and the ambiguity surrounding the CP role noted above, can encourage the narrowing of SNT tasking towards crime-orientated tasks. This can leave alternative tasks such as knowledge brokering and relationship-building to be seen as of secondary importance to CP (even though officers and partners value these tasks and perceive them to be core CP tasks).
- Council-police partnership working was generally perceived to be of value by both the Council and the police. The quality of partnership working was, however, perceived to be variable and dependent on the relationships between particular personnel.

- Information exchange between the SNTs and the Council through Summary Reports were of potential value, although officers expressed concerns that the quantitative data collected did not adequately capture all that they thought was valuable CP work. SNTs also felt that they would have benefited from some feedback from the Council on their Summary Reports and how useful they were. Greater dialogue between the police and the Council on the content and use of Summary Reports could make them a more meaningful mechanism for information exchange and capturing the work of SNTs.
- As the internal police performance framework provides limited information for what is practically expected from the SNT, officers develop their understanding of the role through experience and intuition. This is potentially problematic because CP means different things to different people, even within the SNT (this is illustrated by the different understandings of CP held by newcomers and more experienced CP officers). This is not to say that there should be a 'one size fits all' approach to SNT work (a potential strength of CP is that it can be responsive to distinctive needs of distinctive neighbourhoods), rather that it could enhance some consistency of practice if there was greater agreement on core principles and tasks of CP.
- Peer learning provides an important means through which officers develop their sense of the CP role and what it entails (newcomers felt that they learned about the role from more experienced peers and Sergeants). Future provision of training might consider the potential value of peer learning in this context.

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