

Engagement

Why? Who? What? How?

This update outlines key themes and areas of discussion arising from the collaborative seminar on public engagement held at the University of Liverpool on 7th January 2016. Representatives from 8 police forces, 1 office of the police and crime commissioner (OPCC) and 3 universities took part. Prior to the event police participants were asked to provide short written briefings about their organisations' approaches to engagement, addressing the following questions:

- Why do/should we engage with the public?
- Who do/should we engage with?
- What do/should we engage with the public about?
- What form does/should engagement take?

These questions provided the structure for discussions on the day.

Why do/should we engage with the public?

Reasons for engaging with the public could be roughly separated into two categories: **normative** and **pragmatic**.

Normative reasons for engagement included:

- To understand the needs and wishes of the public
- To build trust, confidence and legitimacy
- To facilitate social cohesion and community wellbeing
- To help the public feel safe
- To ensure people know how to access support

A statement that might be said to usefully encapsulate the attitude of the discussants on the day is: *'Engaging with the public is the right thing to do. We police for the public, not on them. Policing is a two-way contract with the public to be agreed through consultation not force.'*

Pragmatic reasons for engagement included:

- To identify tensions within communities and address problems before they escalate
- To police more effectively and efficiently
- To manage expectations about what police can and can't do in times of austerity and deliver hard messages
- To get information and intelligence to help target police action
- To reduce demand for certain policing services
- To empower communities to do some policing for themselves
- To harness the public as a resource in assisting the police
- To learn from the public and get help in problem-solving – police don't have all the answers

The general view of participants was that the public need to be involved in policing, taking on certain parts of policing for themselves; supporting the police with information and intelligence and feeling able to make (reasonable) demands on police resources when needed.

Who do/should we engage with?

Participants in the seminar felt strongly that public engagement should not be limited to particular sections of society. Police engagement activities should seek to reach everyone at some level (although it was recognised that approaches to engagement would need to be varied to suit diverse communities). However, whilst recognising that police should seek to engage with everyone it was also generally agreed that priority should be given to reaching more vulnerable groups such as children, older people, BME communities and recent immigrants, including refugees and asylum seekers.

What do/should we engage with the public about?

Four priority areas for focusing engagement activities were identified by participants:

- Understanding public priorities and what the public need or want from police
- Helping the public to understand the role of the police and their responsibilities, as well as identifying responsibilities which in fact fall to other agencies (for example local councils)
- Communicating with the public about constraints on police resources
- Early identification of issues and tensions within communities

What form does/should engagement take?

Discussion of the best way(s) to do engagement generated a wide range of ideas, indicating that engagement is a complex and varied activity that cannot be pinned down to a limited range of events and initiatives. There was a strong view expressed that engagement was something that many police officers and staff do *every day* when encountering members of the public in the course of their ordinary role.

Next steps

This event was intended to assist in shaping the direction of the public engagement strand of the Catalyst Project. The wide variety of ideas and opinions expressed by participants indicated that further focused consultation needed to be undertaken in order to progress the work of the public engagement strand, and ensure that policing partners' needs were taken into account. The next steps were for the strand lead to undertake further telephone discussions with strategic leads for engagement within the different police forces and OPCCs, and to collate information from their community engagement strategy and activity plan documents to gain a better understanding of the engagement landscape in the North of England.