

Police-Community Engagement Strategies in the North of England

The practice of ‘community engagement’ in policing is wide-ranging. This strand update uses the strategy and action plan documents provided by five police forces in northern England to summarise the ways in which community engagement work is structured, including the similarities and differences between forces.

What is Community Engagement?

The College of Policing Authorised Professional Practice guidance describes community engagement as

“the process of enabling citizens and communities to participate in policing at their chosen level [...]. This ranges from providing information and assurance, to empowering them to identify and implement solutions to local problems and influence strategic priorities and decisions” (College of Policing, 2017)

While the College of Policing definition is referred to in the force strategy documents examined, for some forces explanations of community engagement tend to be organised around standards and/or specific tasks (see Table 1 for examples). Different features of practice are highlighted in different strategy documents. In one document, the point is explicitly made that engagement occurs in every interaction between the police and members of the public. In others, there is a focus on facilitating meaningful contact with communities by tailoring engagement activity to the specific needs of the community being targeted. In all the outlines, there is a shared understanding of engagement work entailing the provision of opportunities for communities to be involved in policing through one or more of the following ways:

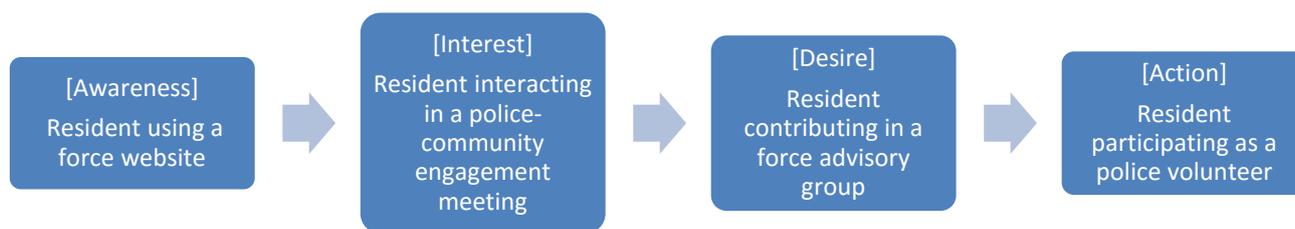
- Making information about local policing accessible to all
- Establishing a dialogue with communities that comprises of mechanisms to inform, consult and seek feedback
- Collaborating with communities to identify and resolve local issues
- Encouraging participation of communities in the planning or delivery of policing services

Table 1 - Examples of Standards Used to Define Community Engagement

Example 1	Example 2
-Provide information	-Understand
-Consult	-Identify
-Involve people in decision-making	-Inform
-Involve people in service delivery	-Involve
-Empower communities	-Listen
	-Feedback
	-Make every interaction a positive one

Community engagement as a ‘process’ – the idea that a series of actions or steps are taken to develop engagement activity with the public – is highlighted by some forces. In one instance, the Attention, Interest, Desire and Action (AIDA) model, an acronym originating in marketing and advertising, is used to illustrate a continuum of community engagement where citizens may move from passively acknowledging policing to actively participating (see Figure 1). In another case, a form of action planning is advocated which considers community engagement work as a ‘pathway’ progressing in stages, including ‘starting’, ‘organising’, ‘implementing’ and ‘showing impact’.

Figure 1 - Example of Community Engagement Using the AIDA Model



Why do police need to engage with communities?

In a number of plans, the context of community engagement work is outlined by referencing the reasons why it is an important part of policing. These rationales centre on police engagement with the community, including positive police-public encounters and opportunities for the public to understand and question police practice, enhancing perceptions of police fairness and legitimacy. In most cases, the many benefits of community engagement are promoted to reinforce the fact that effective policing relies on the support of the public (see Table 2).

Table 2 - Summary of the Benefits of Community Engagement

Increasing public trust and confidence in the police
Improving service delivery – increased efficiency and effectiveness, including avoiding financial costs
Designing services that meet the needs of the public and tackle issues that cause the most concern
Forging meaningful community relations
Accessing new and knowledgeable sources of information
Identifying strategies that might not otherwise have been considered
Pinpointing underlying community tensions
Increased public perceptions of safety
Tendency towards a reduction in crime and disorder and ASB
Improvement in police officers’ attitudes and job satisfaction
Greater understanding of how policing strategies may affect individuals/communities
Increased respect for the law
Fostering social responsibility

Who should the police engage with in communities?

The use of the word ‘community’ in ‘community engagement’ signifies *all* members of the public, and each force acknowledges that everyone should have the opportunity to understand and influence policing. There is also recognition that the term community is complex; the nature and structure of communities is varied and people identify with communities in different ways. The main distinction that forces make is that communities can be defined by place (the geographical areas in which people reside) and by interest (the experiences or characteristics they share). Some forces expand on the definition of community by highlighting that people are often members of more than one community or may not identify themselves with any, and that even within recognised communities a lot of diversity exists. In emphasising the diverse nature and composition of communities, a number of forces recommend profiling methods to identify some or all of the following features of communities to tailor engagement work:

- What communities exist
- The membership and location of communities

- The risks and tensions present in communities
- How members of communities interact

In all cases, the importance and necessity of engaging vulnerable and hard to reach or seldom-heard individuals and groups is highlighted, as is the potential to be more effective in this by working with partner organisations. Similarly, engaging with those who are identified as having less trust and confidence in the police in order to increase understanding around what matters to them is raised in some documents. All of the documents indicate to some extent that by taking steps to develop relationships with all parts of the community they can increase the accessibility of officers; enhance their knowledge-base; seek more feedback; and overcome any barriers to public engagement in policing.

How should police engage with communities?

Focusing on the ways in which forces specify the planning and delivery of community engagement, three distinct categories of practice are identified: ‘providing information and consultation with communities’; ‘targeted interventions in communities’; and ‘community participation in police decision-making and service delivery’.

Table 3 - Examples of Providing Information and Consulting Communities

Local presence and interaction: local policing teams attending high footfall areas and high profile events involving minority communities; named staff and contact details advertised in each ward; positive encounters (friendly, respectful, fair and approachable staff ethos); asking questions and getting to know local communities; force band; safer school partnerships	Digital methods: use of social media; e-newsletters; digital applications/messaging systems to alert the public and receive feedback; video productions; blogs; live webchats; online surveys; interactive/mobile friendly websites
Campaigns aligned to seasonal and emerging force priorities	Patrols accompanied by members of the public
Street briefings	‘Patch walks’ with community members and other partners
Traditional media – press releases; newsletters	List of Key Individuals (KINS) – contact on an appropriate basis
Database of contact information - used to target audiences	Kiosk screens in stations
Liaising with victims of crime (explaining actions taken and providing crime prevention advice)	Frontline staff as force ambassadors/leads for engagement work in each ward
Market research with target audiences	Working actively with partner agencies/key stakeholders, voluntary organisations and community groups
Using academic research/partnerships	Conducting Community Impact Assessments (prior, during or after significant, critical or major incidents)

Providing Information and Consultation with Communities

Communication is the main focus of engagement work in the strategy and action plan documents. All the forces detail the use of different direct and indirect communicative mechanisms to relay specific information or support; construct community profiles including information around risks and vulnerabilities; develop relationships or networks; and receive feedback (see Table 3 for examples). These methods are considered a way to increase the resources and knowledge available to local policing teams in addition to informing their strategic priorities and interventions. There is a common emphasis on policing teams making an effort to establish two-way dialogue with

communities using both traditional and contemporary forms of communication. Conventional face-to-face contact with the public in localities is recommended alongside developing new systems of communication through digital and social media. By establishing a wide range of approaches to providing information and consulting with communities, some forces expressly draw attention to delivering local policing that is purposeful, effective and efficient.

Targeted Interventions in Communities

A number of forces reference designing and delivering initiatives coordinated with other agencies or groups to provide preventative support and/or resolve identified issues. These interventions are presented as tailored policing responses to the concerns raised by the public or detected through the course of officers' routine duties in neighbourhoods. Similarly, one force advocates officer patrols informed by intelligence to keep the task focussed around the needs of the community. The requirement to reflect the community in police work is also highlighted by a couple of forces devising recruitment strategies to develop the representativeness of their workforces. These take the form of action plans for each community to build positive links and increase the employment of underrepresented groups.

Community Participation in Police Decision-Making and Service Delivery

The facilitation of public participation in police decision-making and service delivery is recognised by all the forces and in some cases this aspect of engagement work is described as empowering communities to take action to deal with local issues. In the strategy and action plan documents the specific ways forces intend to enable the public to problem solve and implement solutions is confined to establishing, maintaining or improving the following opportunities the public currently can access to influence policing:

- Advisory panels (also referred to as scrutiny panels or focus groups)
- Neighbourhood Watch
- Independent Custody Visitor Scheme
- Volunteer roles in policing (Special Constabulary; police support volunteers; police cadets)

Next Steps

The five strategy and action plan documents reveal a lot of similarities in how police forces understand and approach community engagement work in their respective areas with only subtle variations in emphasis on particular features of practice. The documents are useful in gauging the way in which community engagement is structured in police forces at policy level. To build on this, the Community Engagement Showcase Event to be held on Tuesday 9th May 2017 will provide an opportunity for police officers and staff working on the frontline of engagement to describe specific practice examples of engagement activities they have been involved in and the impact that they have had. This event will be an opportunity for practitioners to network and share ideas with one another, as well as identifying examples of best practice from across police forces in the North of England.

References

College of Policing (2017) *Authorised Professional Practice – Engagement and Communication* [online]. Available from: <https://www.app.college.police.uk/app-content/engagement-and-communication/?s=> (Accessed: 11 April 2017).