

Police-Community Engagement Showcase

On 9th May, 71 delegates from universities, police forces and OPCCs across the North of England attended the Police-Community Engagement Showcase event in Leeds. The programme for the day included four academic presentations, a presentation on the EU-funded Unity Project (being coordinated by the West Yorkshire OPCC) and 13 presentations on practical community engagement activities delivered by representatives from police forces and OPCCs. This briefing provides an overview of themes emerging from discussions on the day, and some observations on those themes.

Activities understood as community engagement are wide-ranging and often combine multiple objectives.

Presentations on the day indicated that the term ‘community engagement’ is used to refer to activities aimed at satisfying a variety of police objectives, from involving the community in efforts to identify offenders or find missing persons, to building trust amongst hard-to-reach groups, to diverting young people away from criminal and anti-social behaviour, to gathering intelligence. Furthermore, some mechanisms and activities are used to do several things at once. For example, community messaging systems are seen as a way to communicate key messages, including messages about particular crimes and crime risks, and as a way to harness members of the public as an investigative resource (by identifying people who have CCTV outside of their houses, for example). The sheer variety of activity and objectives makes it difficult to have one coherent conversation about what engagement is and how it should be done. There was broad agreement that in order to target relevant research efforts more effectively it is necessary to break community-engagement down into different types of activities with different objectives. This could be advantageous in terms of identifying the most appropriate forms of research evidence and the individuals who have the most relevant expertise for different types of community engagement.

The police cannot do everything themselves and must consider who else can help them.

Many delegates commented that one outcome of more effective community engagement would be reduced demand on police resources due to communities gaining confidence and understanding when other agencies could and should help and when community members themselves might be better able to support the police through community action. Two academic presentations suggested there may be a useful role for non-police intermediaries. Donna Marie Brown talked about her research with community wardens in Scotland, telling how the wardens were able to build strong relationships with communities and broker solutions to specific problems where police may have previously become involved (e.g. breaking down barriers between young people and older people). Donna Marie argued that the wardens may have been particularly successful precisely because they were not police. Pamela Fisher talked in a similar way about the role of community mediators in Sheffield.

Some officers were concerned that such intermediaries may not be helpful in terms of repairing problematic relationships between police and some communities. However, given limitations on

resources, forces may wish to consider whether their officers are always the right people to be stepping in when certain community tensions flare, and whether intermediaries who are closer to and perhaps more trusted by the communities may be better able to broker solutions which may have potential in terms of reducing demand on police and improving the quality of life in some areas.

New technologies and media platforms have significant potential but are not a panacea.

Several presentations highlighted the considerable potential of new technologies and media platforms for facilitating faster and wider communication with communities and enlisting the support of community members willing to receive and respond to updates and alerts. However, some delegates expressed doubts about whether all members of the public would wish to feature in a police database, even if that database was devised with the best of intentions by the officers involved. Such initiatives may not be trusted by all groups and may alienate some. The continuing relevance of traditional media, including local radio and newspapers, was emphasised. Discussions focused on the fact that different groups of people have very different ways of accessing and using media and police need to ensure that nobody is missed out by their communication efforts. There was also concern about the lack of reliable and comparable data on different commercially-available technology systems. Such data could be useful in order to enable forces to make more informed procurement decisions about the relative merits and return-on-investment different approaches offer.

Front-line officers differ markedly in their skill and confidence at engaging and communicating with individuals.

Discussions revealed a sense that whilst some officers are particularly good at communicating with people from many different backgrounds, others may lack the skills and confidence to be effective in doing so. Opportunities to build rapport and trust with communities may be being missed because officers who lack confidence may stick to interacting with the public in those situations where their sense of what needs to be done is clearer, for example where they are responding to an incident, where a crime has been alleged or where they suspect someone is involved in a crime. Some delegates felt that given the varying levels of skill and confidence officers have it may be best to have specific officers who are recognised specialists at engagement. Others felt that it would be better to ensure all officers have skill and confidence in this area, and to make more guidance and training available to those who need it.

There is a lack of collaborative working across force boundaries when it comes to community engagement.

Many delegates commented that they had not previously had the opportunity to meet with officers and staff from other forces to talk about what they were doing in terms of 'community engagement'. It was noted that forces face similar issues and are often exploring or pursuing similar types of solutions (including commercial solutions) without sharing learning, best practice and cautionary tales. Delegates agreed that they would benefit from continuing to share ideas and experiences through a North of England Police-Community Engagement network.

Next steps

This event has provided an insight into the range of issues and challenges involved in delivering police-community engagement. In the coming months, further work will be undertaken to map the community engagement landscape in the North of England, identifying shared objectives, innovative practice, and common challenges. This work will involve researchers visiting different police force areas to talk to key contacts within forces and OPCCs about their work. It will lead to the production of a report later this year.

The event also acted as a launch event for the North of England Police-Community Engagement Network. Following on from the event all those who attended are being asked to indicate whether they would like to join the network and what they think priorities should be for future events and research. If you would like to join the network please follow [this link](#) to provide your details and indicate the topics you are interested in.

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