

Interviews with Community Engagement Practitioners – Emerging Findings

From July to September 2017 a series of semi-structured face-to-face individual and group interviews were conducted with individuals working in police-community engagement in the North of England. The invitation to take part was extended to individuals who had previously engaged in some way with the public engagement strand of the N8 Policing Research Partnership Catalyst Project, including individuals who attended the Public Engagement Showcase event that took place in May 2017. In total 22 individuals from 7 different organisations (4 police forces and 3 police and crime commissioners' offices (OPCCs)) took part in 15 separate interviews. Interviews were audio recorded and fully transcribed to allow for in-depth analysis. This briefing provides an overview of some of the key themes emerging from the initial review of these transcripts.

The briefing discusses 5 key aspects of engagement explored during the interviews:

- **Aims and objectives** – What are police and OPCCs trying to achieve through community engagement?
- **Structures and strategies** – How does engagement fit into wider organisational structures and strategies?
- **People, partners and populations** – Who do police and OPCCs seek to engage with and why?
- **Methods and mechanisms** – What are the main methods and mechanisms used to facilitate engagement?
- **Accountability and outcomes** – How do police and OPCCs gauge the effectiveness of what they are doing?

Note on the limitations of the study

It should be noted that the findings of this small study provide an insight into how the participants understand and describe community engagement work within their organisation. Their perspectives may not reflect the views of others working within their organisations, nor should they be taken to be definitive accounts of the work their organisations do. Nonetheless we think that these discussions reveal something about police-community engagement work in practice. It should also be noted that this briefing offers some insights based on an initial (and therefore provisional analysis). Further analysis will be carried out over the coming months and insights shared as appropriate.

Aims and objectives

What are police and OPCCs trying to achieve through community engagement?

Interview participants identified a wide range of aims and objectives for community engagement activity. Broadly speaking these can be divided into two different types of aim:

- (1) Aims that seek to benefit the organisation as it pursues its own objectives.
- (2) Aims that seek to benefit the community, or the people engaged.

Aims that seek to benefit the organisation include:

- Communicating “positive messages” to the public in order to gain approval/positive public perceptions of police/OPCC.
- Gaining public support and legitimacy and “breaking down barriers” so that members of the public will assist the police if necessary.
- Getting information or intelligence from the community to support prevention and enforcement.
- Encouraging communities to take responsibility for preventing crime and victimisation and for dealing with some issues themselves.
- Reducing demand on the police by informing and educating the public about other agencies who have responsibilities the public assume are the police’s (for example dealing with litter or parking issues), or by intervening early with communities considered to be potentially risky (e.g. young people, some minority communities).
- Raising awareness about the work of the Police and Crime Commissioner.

Aims that seek to benefit the community or individual engaged include:

- Providing reassurance so that people feel safer and supported.
- Understanding the needs and preferences of communities.
- Allowing the public to influence the priorities of the police, and (perhaps) their ways of working.

Of course, organisations achieving their own objectives may well benefit the communities they serve so in practice these two types of aim are usually being pursued at the same time. Indeed, the interviews revealed that in the eyes of practitioners much engagement work is regarded as benefitting both the community and the organisation. However, it is important to interrogate any assumption that this is always the case. An obvious example of this is where engagement work has a clear objective of raising the profile and improving public approval of a particular Police and Crime Commissioner. In this case it is important to explore whether raising the PCC’s profile and improving their reputation (and thus potentially increasing their chances of being re-elected) is automatically beneficial for the community. As one interviewee working for a PCC commented: “The commissioner’s happy with it. Is it working for the community? That’s a question we need to ask”. We should also consider that in the absence of effective mechanisms for communities to have a meaningful influence on police priorities and ways of working, the police gaining additional intelligence in order to pursue their own organisational objectives (enforcement, for example) should not always be assumed to produce outcomes which match with the priorities or long-term interests of communities. Indeed, one might argue that community engagement organised around primarily *extractive* instrumental ends (getting information out of communities) ought not to be considered to be engagement unless the community are also involved in exploring how the problems facing them *ought* to be addressed.

Structures and strategies

How does engagement fit into wider organisational structures and strategies?

The way in which community engagement activity is organised and resourced varies significantly between organisations, as does the extent to which it appears to be integrated with other organisational functions. Whilst most of the organisations visited had some form of written document identifying a community engagement strategy or action plan (some of which were discussed in Update 2), interviewees often acknowledged that the document was not necessarily well-known outside of specialist community engagement teams. Indeed, one police officer commented that a strategy document might “look good on the office wall” of a senior officer but was often irrelevant to most officers’ day to day work.

Several interviewees alluded to a sense that community engagement ought to be part of the everyday work of police as opposed to being perceived as a specialist role (a sentiment which echoes findings reported in previous strand updates (see Update 1, Update 2 and Update 3)). However, it was acknowledged that this ideal situation often came up against various sources of resistance, including a lack of understanding of the value of community engagement and, more commonly, the pressures of workload and limited resources. The difference between reactive and proactive engagement was also a topic of interest, with most interviewees indicating a preference for engagement to be proactive, rather than responding after some form of crisis had occurred.

There appears to be significant variation between force areas when it comes to the nature of the relationship between police and OPCC community engagement activity. Some OPCC interviewees referred to their engagement activity as being somewhat dependent on the activities of police (for example using uniformed officers as a way to attract public attention or ‘piggybacking’ on police events or activities) whilst others stated that in many instances (especially where community trust in police is low) it was important for the OPCC to engage with communities separately from police, and certainly away from any uniformed presence. There also seems to be variation in the extent to which OPCCs have taken ownership of engagement mechanisms previously run by police (for example Independent Advisory Groups (IAGs)). Interestingly, in two of the OPCC interviews reference was made to frontline officers being able to use PCCs to provide feedback to their Chief Constable on things they were unhappy about (“Tell the Commissioner...”).

People, communities and partners

Who do police and OPCCs seek to engage with?

Interviewees referred in quite general terms to engaging with “communities” (e.g. “BME communities”, “faith communities”, “the LGBT community”). They also identified certain groups (e.g. “young people”, “hard-to-reach”, “seldom heard”), as well as simply referring to “people”. Overall,

interviewees communicated a sense that engagement should seek to reach everyone (a view also reported in Update 1), but that “everyone” could best be understood by thinking in terms of particular groupings or “communities”. Indeed, some interviewees explicitly referred to analytical resources that provide information on the characteristics of different “communities” in their policing area (e.g. MOSAIC). The idea of a “community” then seems to function as a convenient way of making sense of the inherent diversity of the public in general. It also creates a division between the community *out there*, and the police (and to some extent the OPCC staff) *in here*, implicitly recognising that outsiders to police are likely to have different perspectives from insiders on what the problems are and how they should be addressed. This indicates police recognition that they cannot know everything and need the help of communities to understand what is going on (this point is well-illustrated by the comment from one interviewee that “communities are where the problems start”, signalling that the police need to listen to communities to understand why issues arise).

So, it seems that the idea of community serves an important function by:

- (1) Identifying a potential gap or discrepancy between “police” understandings/views and “community” understandings and views and signalling that this gap should be addressed.
- (2) Providing a way of making sense of the diversity of the general public, recognising that it is not homogenous but consists of different groupings.

The language of “community” was frequently used by interviewees to refer to individuals considered to have something in common, whether that be a geographical location, an identity, a set of interests, a general riskiness or vulnerability or something else. So, the *idea* of a community was invoked in reference to both places, and to assumed shared interests (e.g. “the business community”), whilst the *existence* of communities was implied by the use of markers of identity (e.g. “traveller”, “trans”, “Muslim”, “Polish”). At times the way these identity marker terms were used suggested a tendency to assume that individuals with particular identity-related characteristics actually would share common interests and views on policing, and that therefore engaging with one or two representatives with such characteristics could count as effectively engaging with a “community” as a whole.

Some interviewees indicated that they were concerned about their organisation’s ability to engage effectively with people from all different backgrounds, expressing concern that an ability to engage with *some* individuals with certain identity characteristics could result in complacency about their effectiveness in engaging with *all* people with those characteristics. As such, the idea of engaging *communities* can be problematic if it leads to a conflation of shared *characteristics* with shared *perspectives* or *interests*. On the other hand, some interviewees expressed concerns that their organisation’s ability to reach high numbers of people through, for example, social media, might mask a relative neglect of people from backgrounds less likely to engage through those means (for example older people or people for whom English is not their first language). In this case the idea that the public consists of different groupings (or “communities”), with varied habits, capabilities, experiences and needs, provides a useful way of recognising potential blind-spots and exclusions in police and OPCC practice. The language of “community” therefore serves a positive function of acknowledging diversity

and difference in characteristics and needs, although it can also have a negative impact by allowing the assumption that shared characteristics indicate shared perspectives and interests.

The interviews also revealed that the term “engagement” is often used to refer to any contact between police/OPCCs and individuals from different organisations, as well as the general public. So, for example, meeting and/or joint-working with local authorities or non-statutory bodies is sometimes understood as a form of “engagement”. As such, organisations and people who are often referred to as “partners” are regarded as potential targets for engagement, and relationships with “partners” are seen to require thoughtful management. Indeed, several interviewees recounted instances in which partnership working could be challenging. Examples given of partners that might require careful management included local Neighbourhood Watch groups, and local authorities. Interviewees suggested that entrenched ways of working and fixed worldviews could make it difficult to develop good working relationships with some partners. Another group also referred to by some interviewees as partners was private security guards. They were referred to as a useful additional resource “when we don’t have staff in those localities” when given appropriate powers (for example “to take names and details”). “Engaging” with private security guards was spoken of by one interviewee as serving a similar function to engaging with the public, that of “mobilising” and “empowering” an additional policing resource so as to reduce demand on police.

Methods and mechanisms

What are the main methods and mechanisms used to facilitate engagement?

The interviews revealed a wide range of ways in which police and OPCCs consider themselves to be “engaging” with members of the public. These include:

- Having a visible presence at community events.
- Organising their own events.
- Conducting ‘walk arounds’ with local councillors.
- Doing ‘pop up’ engagements at shopping centres and supermarkets.
- Delivering leaflets.
- Visiting schools.
- Using traditional media outlets, including local newspapers and radio.
- Using new online technologies, including both exploiting popular social media platforms and bought-in bespoke systems.
- Running police ‘cadet’ sections for children and young people.
- Any everyday interaction in which the police officer/police or OPCC staff member takes the opportunity to add value (e.g. by giving security advice, signposting to support services or otherwise doing more than the minimum demanded of the interaction).

Many interviewees spoke of a contrast between “old” and “new” ways of engaging. Online and technology-based methods of engagement were understood as “new”, whilst mechanisms such as PACT (Police and Communities Together) meetings were referred to as representing an older and increasingly obsolete (and potentially unsustainable) approach. However, that is not to say that all face-to-face engagement was regarded as “old”. Some interviewees identified innovative ways of engaging people face-to-face including “World Café” events.

It was notable that different engagement mechanisms were sometimes used to achieve the same objectives. For example, face-to-face and online mechanisms might be used in tandem to seek feedback from members of the public on police and crime plans and gather views on policing priorities. Furthermore, it was frequently the case that one engagement mechanism (for example attendance at a community event) was used to achieve multiple objectives simultaneously, for example raising awareness, educating, and gathering views all at the same time (as Update 3 noted “activities understood as community engagement are wide-ranging and often combine multiple objectives”). The idea of “engagement” then refers to a range of potential interactions between police/OPCC personnel and the public, running on a continuum from the public being extremely passive (merely seeing the police or OPCC staff or receiving a leaflet or some crime prevention advice from them), to the public being invited into interactive experiences (for example debating the appropriate priorities and pattern of policing services for an area). Where any particular mechanism applied on any given day sits on this continuum could depend as much on the personnel present on the day and on the inclinations of the members of the public engaged with as on the stated aims of the event or initiative.

A further interesting theme emerging from the interviews was the simultaneous use of off-the-peg social media platforms (e.g. Facebook, Twitter, Instagram) and bespoke purchased systems from commercial providers. Most interviewees indicated that their organisation had purchased some form of commercial messaging system which functioned alongside the use of social media. However, the reach and added value of these systems was unclear, with such evidence as interviewees referred to being either in the form of number of sign-ups to the system (which tells us little about value), or anecdotal evidence of where the system had helped officers to locate a missing person. The extent to which these commercial systems delivered tangible advantages over social media was unclear.

It was not clear from the interviews whether and to what extent organisations had developed systematic digital communications strategies (as opposed to acceptable use policies) and in most cases it seemed that the use of digital technology for the purposes of engagement had emerged and evolved in a rather *ad hoc* and uneven fashion depending on the availability of officers with a flare for using social media to communicate directly with the public. Interviewees who had been involved in developing new approaches to engagement using social media indicated that in some ways they had opened a Pandora’s box, creating new forms of demand on officer time to “service the beast”. However, bottom-up approaches to developing digital engagement appear to have had some significant success in certain areas in ways that have caught central community engagement teams off-guard. Subsequent attempts to emulate these bottom-up initiatives reveal that successful engagement of this kind depends to a large extent on the attributes of individual officers. Officers who have

established successful online followings without being prompted to do so from above can find it unsettling when their success is subjected to scrutiny or even suspicion. Their success seems to underline the fact (recognised by most interviewees) that much engagement relies on relationships cultivated by skilful individuals.

Overall, discussion of mechanisms and methods of engagement revealed that a wide range of approaches are used but there is a scarcity of evidence about their relative value and effectiveness.

Accountability and outcomes

How do police and OPCCs gauge the effectiveness of what they are doing?

The question of how the value of engagement activity can be captured and measured was of interest to all interviewees. Indeed, a throwaway remark from one participant indicated that there was some hope that academic researchers might be able to provide support by evaluating ongoing engagement initiatives. However, as the interviewees also indicated, the question of how value can be measured is a vexed one. Several interviewees working in specialist community engagement units reported that they were attempting to record what they were doing (activities) and numbers of contacts (outputs), but measuring outcomes (or value-added) was felt to be much more difficult and perhaps impossible. Some suggested that measuring confidence or satisfaction in some way could provide a valuable indicator of the value of their work. One interviewee from an OPCC said (we suspect half in jest) that if the PCC was happy with their engagement activity then that was the key indicator of whether they were doing the right thing. Meanwhile police interviewees made numerous claims about the value of engagement for such things as increasing the flow of intelligence, reducing demand, empowering communities, preventing crime, building confidence and putting people in control of local policing, but most acknowledged that evidence of effectiveness was largely anecdotal.

Concluding thoughts and next steps

This briefing has provided a flavour of some of the key themes emerging from the 15 interviews with 22 practitioners carried out between July and September 2017.

Based on our initial analysis, the term “community engagement” seems to function as a very large umbrella, under which a diverse range of aims and objectives are pursued. The way the term is used by interviewees indicates some key assumptions which seem to underpin “community engagement” activity:

- The perspectives and priorities of police and OPCCs may not always align with those of the public, and a certain amount of alignment is necessary to ensure that the police retain legitimacy and serve the public effectively and that the public have realistic expectations of police.

- The public consists of separate groupings that may be usefully understood as distinct “communities”.
- Whilst contact between police and some members of the public inevitably happens in the course of every day police work, the specific purpose of “engagement” is to add value over and above purely functional contacts. Thus, the officer who gives crime prevention advice as well as taking a statement is taking an opportunity to do “engagement” just as much as the officer who attends a community event specifically to provide the same advice.

These might seem to be rather obvious points, but we think that making them helps to clarify the position of “community engagement” in relation to other aspects of police work. It is clear both from these interviews, and from the information gathered to support the production of our earlier updates (see updates 1, 2 and 3) that there is an evidence shortage when it comes to evaluating the success of police-community engagement activity in the North of England. We think this may be partly attributable to the diversity of initiatives and approaches that come under the police-community engagement umbrella which make it rather difficult to speak of community engagement *in general*. It may also be a result of the wide ranging and somewhat loosely defined aims police and OPCCs seek to pursue through the activities which they call “community engagement”, which make identifying appropriate indicators of “success” extremely difficult.

Because of the diversity, complexity and fluidity of community engagement it seems to us that gauging the effectiveness of this area of police work *in general* is an impossible task. Instead we think that the identification and also the production of more robust and usable evidence on police-community engagement requires a more focussed approach. One way to do this would be to separate out the different objectives assigned to “community engagement” activity and then specify the causal mechanisms through which it seems to be assumed and intended that these objectives can be achieved. By doing this it may be possible to identify existing sources of evidence that support or indeed challenge these assumption, and if this evidence does not exist it may be possible to identify opportunities to produce such evidence. We will pursue this approach through out ongoing analysis of the interview data, as well as the strategy documents and action plans supplied to us and the wider literature on police-community engagement. We may also seek further clarification from interviewees and partners on their perspectives as we develop the analysis.

As always, we welcome feedback and comments on this document. You can join in with discussions by accessing the members’ area of the N8 Policing Research Partnership website and using the North of England Police Community Engagement Network discussion board. If you require a log-in for the website please contact the Project Manager [Steph Abraham](#).

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