

Principles for accountable policing

A discussion summary from the report launch

31 March 2023

This is a summary of a discussion held under the Chatham House rule

How can this report make an impact?

The biggest concern amongst the audience was how the report could meaningfully change the way the police service operated. This was just one of a series of reports that had been published over the last 40 years (including the landmark Scarman, MacPherson and Casey reports) with little appearing to have changed.

It was argued that change must be mandatory, giving the example of the transition from the Royal Ulster Constabulary (RUC) to the Police Service of Northern Ireland (PSNI). The work was challenging, and the changes were initially very unpopular among rank-and-file officers but all parties were brought on board and culture change followed. Strategies such as ensuring that changes in practice are tied to promotion and performance appraisals could ensure that change processes are sufficiently embedded.

There was some scepticism that wholesale change could happen outside the context of Northern Ireland, which was assumed to be driven by a societal shift. It was suggested that change could happen in other contexts, and that the societal change in Northern Ireland was in a greater part driven by changes to the police service.

Human rights

It was argued that human rights should be placed at the heart of police practice as quite simply this was what policing is all about. 'Values-based' rather than 'rules-based' practice was identified as a far more powerful way to regulate and oversee the police service rather than simply imposing a set of rules. Values-based practice is absolutely vital to policing by consent, underlining that the police service ultimately exists to serve the public rather than standing in opposition to it.

Educating PSNI officers about human rights had been an integral part of the transformation of the police service in Northern Ireland and this offered a model for police services in other jurisdictions.

Mechanisms for change

There was discussion about where culture change should start, with the frontline or at leadership level? One person felt that it should start with frontline officers as they were directly in touch with the public and this was the only way that public confidence could be changed.

Others felt that change must start at leadership level as it is police leaders, particularly superintendents and chief superintendents, who set the tone for the whole service. One person suggested that role modelling and leadership happens at every level in the police hierarchy and that transforming the service should be systemic: to effectively change police

culture there must be a multitude of enabling factors, or levers, to ensure that in day to day practice an officer is comfortable reporting a case of harassment or any other significant incident.

While the report incorporates management level tools it is intended to be an accessible document and the principles could naturally be incorporated into police training, benefiting frontline officers as well as senior leadership.

It was proposed that the police service could learn from accountability models in other sectors, for example the health service uses lay committees (representing healthcare users) that hold considerable power. Police community consultative groups introduced following the recommendations in the Scarman report have very little overt power although they are good at building relationships and have led to some innovative practice.

Police culture

The adage ‘culture eats strategy for breakfast’, which illustrates the how vital organisational culture is, led to a discussion about the importance of changing police culture and how easy (or difficult) that is.

One person suggested that it was a hugely complex task that was in many ways dependent on education and training, however another individual said that in practice culture can change on a daily basis, and within small groups of people, depending on the setting officers find themselves in. The example was given of a neighbourhood officer with a previously unblemished record who switched to response work. Overnight his reputation changed. This wasn't due to a fundamental personal change but because of the way in which he was expected to operate: neighbourhood work was essentially community-focused, whereas response policing involved more combative work.

Individual and organisational accountability and learning

The vital importance of a learning culture was discussed. It is particularly because of the complexity of policing; for example there are no simple answers for how to conduct stop and search or around the use of many other intrusive powers.

Others underlined how vital it was that officers are trained with the knowledge and skills they need to do their job properly. They cannot be held personally accountable for mistakes resulting from inadequate training. While human rights and values-based practice should lead police activity, rather than simply ‘following the rules’, ensuring officers have a proper understanding of the law is critical, for example it is important to provide clear guidance on when it is permissible to carry out surveillance.

Another person pointed out that accountability must be prompt – it is no good waiting five years for a report to be completed to determine what went wrong after a serious event.

It was noted that the 12 principles for accountable policing could apply at an organisational and individual level. While individuals should be held to account, it was suggested that systems-based change is where the biggest difference can be made. In contrast to other sectors, such as aviation or industry, which take a broader look at accidents or error from an operational and technical point of view, policing can be adept at avoiding organisational responsibility. The attitude that the service is sound apart from a ‘few bad apples’ wouldn't be found in other sectors.

It was noted that the police are often too quick to switch to disciplinary proceedings when HR could effectively deal with poor practice or many conduct problems. Policing is a complex business and risk aversion discourages officers from the learning from their mistakes and drives an overly rule-observant workforce.

One individual said that a learning culture should be based on openness, but in doing so the police shouldn't be afraid to tell their story and to provide context. He gave the example of the publication of patient deaths during surgery. It was found that more experienced surgeons had more patient deaths, but this could be explained by the fact that they took on more complex cases.

Driving better practice through a joined up system

It was acknowledged that the fragmented nature of policing in England and Wales could be an impediment to learning and change. There are 43 separate police forces and a number of a national lead bodies that operate separately but have some overlapping remits (NPCC, HMICFRS, College of Policing, IOPC and APCC). Some individuals wanted to see a smarter system where these bodies worked together to promote better police practice.

However, there are signs that this is happening, for example for the first time HMICFRS, the College of Policing, NPCC and IOPC have worked together on the inspection of homicide to determine what works and how to get the greatest benefit in forces. Additionally, the College of Policing holds a bank of innovative practice and HMICFRS is ensuring that this information is being effectively disseminated.

Partnership working

A participant drew attention to the second part of the Principles for Accountable Policing report which proposes that organisations should work in partnership while maintaining autonomy. They asked could this work in practice between Police and Crime Commissioners (PCCs) and Chief Constables when the PCC's re-election is a political matter, and dependent on the performance of the police force?

It was argued that autonomy in a symbiotic relationship could still be achieved through separate personnel, resources and budgets.

Reasons for hope?

The discussion concluded with reasons to be hopeful.

The examples of the formation PSNI and Police Scotland, which led to radical change, show what is possible and could be held up as examples for other jurisdictions. The widespread support from Met officers of all ranks for the findings in the Casey Review is also extremely encouraging.

One panellist mentioned that the UK had produced some excellent research on best police practice. The HMICFRS reports on the best use of stop and search were particularly good examples of this.

Another said that the creation of Police Scotland had shown how the amalgamation of eight different forces into one force (each with very different cultures) and the exemplary training provided to senior officers could be a success. The single force operates very differently, and for the better, demonstrating that culture change is possible.