



Reducing crime through innovation: the role of PCCs

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Foreword

Dr Rick Muir, Director, the Police Foundation

Police and Crime Commissioners (PCCs) are here to stay. The new Prime Minister Theresa May was responsible for their introduction and views them as an important part of her legacy as Home Secretary. The Labour Party has now said that it supports them. Even if any new government did want to change the model, the next wave of PCCs will be elected on the day that has been set by Parliament for the next General Election in May 2020. Even critics of PCCs recognise that the big question is how to improve the model rather than go back to the pre-2012 position.

One important reason for the consolidation of the PCC model is that the sky has not fallen in. There is no evidence that PCCs are systematically 'politicising policing', which was the great fear prior to their introduction. However, I want to argue not just that PCCs have 'done no harm', but rather that they have been a quiet success story.

First, they have considerably strengthened the accountability of the police service to the public. It is my view that the old police authorities lacked the focus and legitimacy to hold chief officers' 'feet to the fire'. Although there is no clear way of measuring the distribution of power in the police service, it is clear to me that the introduction of a new 'big beast' into the local policing jungle has made chief constables much more accountable than they once were.

Second, they have increased public engagement. It was said at the time of the old police authorities that one received as little as a letter a week from members of the public. Any PCC will tell you that their correspondence is of a different order of magnitude. As a number of the case studies in this paper demonstrate, having a single point of contact and a

directly elected politician with a powerful public voice has increased public participation in policing debates that used to happen behind closed doors.

Third, PCCs have unlocked innovation in policing policy. Having a full time public official focused on public safety, armed with commissioning budgets and considerable 'soft power', has led to new ways of doing things. It is this topic which is explored in more detail in this briefing, where we seek to understand the scope and drivers of innovation since 2012, as well as the challenges that remain.

And PCCs do face considerable challenges. Demand on the police has changed considerably since the PCC model was developed, with a fall in traditional volume crime and the rise in reported 'high harm' offences, often committed in private spaces and increasingly enabled via the internet. This requires a major re-think about policing priorities and operating models. Moreover, the increased complexity of police work means there is a pressing need for connectivity – between the police locally and other public services – and between police forces as a network to deal with serious crime and deliver specialist capabilities. That will require further changes to both local and national governance, as well as new models of delivery. We hope that the discussion in this short briefing will help illuminate some of the ways in which these challenges might be met.

Reducing crime through innovation: the role of PCCs

Background:

While back in 2012 there was significant opposition to the introduction of locally elected Police and Crime Commissioners (PCCs), four years later it is clear that they are here to stay. Not only have they received praise from the National Audit Office for improving value for money, but both the Home Affairs Select Committee and Her Majesty's Inspectorate of Constabulary (HMIC) have applauded PCCs for introducing new ways of working and promoting collaboration.

As their second term begins however, significant challenges also remain. Without the burning platform of austerity, there are questions about what will drive further reform and innovation. In addition, for many forces, obvious efficiencies have already been realised and partnerships formed, meaning there is a need to consider carefully new and potentially more radical avenues for change.

In partnership with Barrow Cadbury Fund, the Police Foundation recently held two Party Conference roundtables to explore these issues further. Within these sessions, attendees from across the policing policy community discussed current efforts to reform force practices as well as how to overcome barriers to further innovation.

A driving force for change

There was a strong consensus amongst attendees that PCCs offer much greater opportunity for innovation than their police authority predecessors. It was suggested that because PCCs are democratically elected they have a public mandate for reform which allows Commissioners to drive change more effectively.

In addition, by being charged with more generally reducing crime, rather than overseeing policing in isolation, PCCs have the potential to take a step back from day to day operational concerns and to focus more on issues of prevention and early intervention. Attendees argued that to date a significant proportion of policing continues to focus on the symptoms of wider social issues, but

underlying problems remain and in some cases are worsening. This leads to large amounts of 'repeat demand' where offenders (and victims) circle in and out of the criminal justice system as well as regularly coming into contact with numerous other agencies. By taking a more holistic approach, PCCs therefore have an important opportunity to reduce the burden of repeat offenders and victims, not only within policing but across public services.

Participants highlighted five ways in which PCCs have unlocked innovation.

Increased collaboration

Attendees were clear that the office of the PCC has the capacity to facilitate greater collaboration, and that this power has contributed significantly to a number of

their achievements to date – particularly in the context of generating cost-savings. In 2014, HMIC suggested that 10 per cent of the savings required under the 2010 Spending Review would be realised through collaboration alone.¹

For offenders and victims, it was highlighted that collaboration can have significant benefits. First, the ability to bring together not only police leaders from neighbouring forces, but also representatives from across industry and the public sector is essential for helping vulnerable individuals with complex needs such as mental illness and social exclusion. In Greater Manchester, for example, the establishment of a public services team which includes housing, health, education and criminal justice services provides the opportunity for interventions to be better tailored to individuals needs and for referrals to appropriate support to be made more easily.

Second, diversion from criminal justice sanctions is more straightforward when other services are able to be involved at an early stage. This not only reduces the immediate demand on justice services, particularly in the form of police attendance at incidents, but also reduces the likelihood of individuals' requiring subsequent police interventions – due to the fact that they have received the support and help they require.

In this context, attendees highlighted mental health triage schemes as an example of successful collaboration. By reducing the involvement of police officers, not only will fewer vulnerable people be put in the position of being taken into custody, but the involvement of mental health staff at the first point of contact also means there is valuable access to patient medical records. This may help officers to more

quickly identify solutions for individuals in crisis, such as by helping them establish what prescribed medicines an individual should be taking – as well as better informing the next steps.

Greater partnership working with other agencies such as local authorities and health providers was also viewed as having a number of further advantages. By encouraging the joint-commissioning of services it may be possible to streamline spending processes and therefore realise efficiency savings. In addition, pooling resources can allow for more creative commissioning. Many organisations, including charities and social enterprises for example, can come together to bid for a single large contract, administered by the OPCC. By introducing, and supporting more players to be involved in criminal justice markets, it is possible to drive competition and therefore to also potentially raise service standards without increasing costs.

A number of attendees were also clear, that despite notable successes to date – and arguably significant political appetite for increased partnership working – more collaboration should not occur simply for the sake of it. There must be clear benefits to the forming of new partnerships which should be established on a case by case basis.

It was also argued that while many PCCs have made significant progress, some forces continue to struggle to successfully translate collaborative agreements into practice. In particular, overcoming entrenched ways of working is hugely challenging. The organic development of devolution agreements means there is now a complex patchwork within which to try and achieve meaningful collaboration.

¹ <https://www.justiceinspectorates.gov.uk/hmic/wp-content/uploads/policing-in-austerity-meeting-the-challenge.pdf>

Use of soft power

PCCs have a range of 'hard powers', such as the ability to hire and fire chief constables, as well as commissioning budgets, which give them the capability to drive change. However, PCCs exert a much wider influence than simply using the powers which are laid out within legislation. Alongside the authority to commission services and enter into partnerships, at a local level, Commissioners have the ability to use the soft power that comes with being an elected official with a public voice to influence leaders of other agencies, such as mental health trusts and children's services.

In Northumbria, for example, Vera Baird highlighted the potential for PCCs to influence local industries to help keep the public safe. Following the rape of a young, intoxicated girl who had been witnessed leaving a club with a male passer-by, Commissioner Baird worked with local groups to introduce a new training package for frontline workers involved with the night-time economy. This focuses on how to identify, and take care of, vulnerable people leaving their premises. Despite having no statutory power to require security staff to undergo this training, this safeguarding package is now a compulsory part of the Security Industry Authority's new entrant course for door staff.

The point was also raised that the collective voice of PCCs is hugely powerful. Attendees highlighted the example of commissioners coming together to promote sex education in schools through the collective voice of the Association of Police and Crime Commissioners. In addition, it was argued that at a national level, PCCs can initiate discussion

with the Home Secretary and senior civil servants in a way that was much less feasible for their predecessors or for other individuals within police leadership.

Leveraging the evidence base

Attendees raised the argument that PCC's have an unprecedented ability to help develop the evidence base for 'what works' within policing. It was suggested that this will be achieved through not only their remit to try new things, but also through their ability to commission robust evaluations of new initiatives in order to determine operational effectiveness. This type of work has the potential to not only be beneficial locally, but also to improve policing nationally.

Independent evidence can also be used to help develop blueprints for specific areas of reform. Commissioner Paddy Tipping, for example, highlighted the use of research into the disproportionate use of stop and search on BME communities within Nottinghamshire. By commissioning independent researchers to identify local perceptions of policing he was able to present over 40 separate recommendations to the force. This has led not only to greater levels of awareness amongst force leadership about issues to date, but also improved interactions with the public by highlighting the need for increased training for frontline staff. Back in 2012 in Nottinghamshire, members of the BME community were 16 times more likely to be stopped. This now sits at three times for the Black African /Caribbean community – a clear indication of what can be achieved if evidence is leveraged by PCCs to drive through change.

Increased public engagement

There was also consensus that a more open dialogue with the public through democratically elected PCCs can have a number of advantages.

More open communication can help to challenge misconceptions about what the public wants or expects from the police. Decisions which may be predicted to be unpopular with local communities may actually be welcomed, particularly if the benefits of change are openly discussed by police leaders. Commissioner Jane Kennedy, for example, highlighted that following consultation in Merseyside 80 per cent of local people had supported the closure of a number of police stations, including the force's police headquarters. While this may have been predicted to be an unpopular decision, by explaining that the sale of out-dated, unsuitable and expensive buildings could raise important funds for opening new more accessible premises, often shared with other public services, it was possible to secure public support. The PCC used her public profile and voice to catalyse a debate on this topic that would not otherwise have occurred.

Use of technology

Technology was highlighted as an important tool for driving innovation. In particular, a consistent theme raised by both speakers and attendees was the potential for technology to revolutionise the way in which the police interact with the public. It was suggested that new technologies offer a significant opportunity to maximise the time officers spend out in their communities by supporting more agile ways of working.

In Wiltshire and Swindon for example, (as well as a number of other forces) mobile phones and tablets have been introduced across the frontline. This has significantly reduced the time wasted on returning to stations to complete administrative tasks, as well as providing access to important police databases out in the field. This will again not only save time, but also has the potential to promote more informed decision-making.

It was also argued that officer efficiency can be enhanced through the adoption of video-links, which can enable individuals to give evidence remotely. Currently, significant periods of time can be spent waiting in magistrates' courts to complete this task. Research has found that on average it takes four hours per case in the Metropolitan Police Service with longer periods recorded in more rural regions due to the longer travelling distances to reach the court. Sussex Commissioner Katy Bourne, highlighted a duration of five and a half hours per case in her area (which is only likely to grow in the light of impending closures) as clear evidence of the need for change. Video-enabled justice also has the added advantage of providing vulnerable victims and witnesses with an alternative channel – and an arguably less intimidating one – through which to give evidence.

In addition, attendees highlighted that the introduction of body-worn cameras, particularly in the context of highly sensitive areas like domestic violence and stop and search, can not only speed up case progression (by encouraging higher levels of guilty pleas), but can also enhance transparency and public confidence. Both body cameras and video enabled justice are examples of measures which can both reduce spending and improve levels of satisfaction.

Finally, it was also suggested that innovative ways of presenting data could result in higher levels of accountability. In Staffordshire for example, new policing dashboards, which enable comparisons of key crime types at a ward level, have shone a spotlight on variations in performance. As a result there have been several changes in personnel in order to promote greater consistency. Attendees saw this as encouraging and argued that improving transparency at all ranks is an important part of allowing leaders to build an effective workforce.

Challenges

Participants also highlighted a number of barriers to change within policing that need to be addressed if we are to achieve a more innovative police service.

A fragmented policing system

The PCC model was about strengthening local accountability and devolving policing policy to the force level. However, in doing so it has left a wider policing system that is arguably fragmented and is therefore functioning as 'less than the sum of its parts'. This was highlighted as a significant barrier to change and reform.

In particular there is the problem of ensuring efficiency in the back office due to issues of interoperability and out-dated, legacy IT systems. Not only do different agencies work from different systems, but across forces there is wide variation in the technologies adopted and their day to day use. This inhibits intelligence sharing which is increasingly essential in an age where complex crimes, such as online fraud and child sexual exploitation, often cross multiple force (and even national) borders.

Attendees also raised the point that even where case management systems such as Niche or Storm are common to several constabularies, older or newer versions and different data fields being used for different types of information can still hamper information sharing and lead to confusion.

To tackle this, some attendees suggested that there are areas within policing where national mandated standards could not only streamline processes, but also improve public experiences. However, this view was not universal. Others argued that policing as a system needs a better framework for facilitating collaboration: the whole system, in other words, needs a stronger 'back bone'.

A number of Commissioners present suggested that the current opportunities for PCCs to come together and properly debate issues are few and far between. It was argued that increasing opportunities for joint discussions and decision-making across the 'policing network' should help improve cross-border collaboration and support the establishment of common standards, without the need for Home Office intervention.

It was noted that poor interoperability is a challenge in every country and that the progress that has already been made to date should not be underplayed. Currently, England and Wales has the largest multi-force IT collaboration in the world through the partnership of five police forces in the East Midlands. There may therefore be a need to at least acknowledge that it may simply take more time – of course coupled with continued investment – to achieve greater levels of co-operation.

Outside of the context of technology, it was argued that the lack of common terminology used in specialist

investigations is also problematic. Not only can it lead to uncertainty among new staff, particularly those that may have transferred from other force areas, but it can also hamper interaction with other local agencies – who again may be working with yet another set of terms for the same actions and processes.

Attendees also suggested that greater consistency in training and professional development across forces would help improve the quality of service the public receives. Despite some improvements, particularly following the introduction of the College of Policing, concerns were raised that qualifications and training for the same specialist roles can vary in quality or not even be provided/required in some locations. It was suggested that there can still be a culture within which pride is taken if an officer has 'learnt on the job', rather than pursued more formal training. This resistance to professionalisation and ongoing training is damaging to the public in an age where policing increasingly requires specialist skills to deal with a growing number of complex offences.

Cultural resistance to change

Attendees agreed that cultural barriers to change were very significant – particularly in the context of sharing best practice. For example, in some forces the existence of an attitude of 'it wasn't grown in my patch' can limit the successful transfer of new, more effective ways of working.

It was also suggested that the deeply embedded culture of command and control can prevent new ideas coming forward and new approaches being tested.

In addition, the role of sergeants was highlighted as key in either enabling or blocking new ways of working. New

recruits provide a significant opportunity to break down institutional cultures and bring fresh ideas. However, where new constables are supervised by individuals who are resistant to reform, this important opportunity can be lost. It was suggested that sergeants occupy a very influential position within the police rank structure and can not only stifle new perspectives, but restrict the impact of innovative initiatives – particularly by encouraging a return to old ways of working.

Attendees argued that even in the context of new routes into policing, such as the Direct Entry and Fast Track schemes, new officers who are placed with staff who are unsympathetic to innovation may still conform to existing cultures. PCCs should therefore urge their forces to be more strategic about how officers are managed and developed, and most importantly by whom, in order to maximise the potential of new recruits.

Lastly, attendees suggested that a key ingredient to cultural change is the existence of good operational leaders. It was suggested that in reality many forces are desperately short of these individuals. The low number of applicants for chief officer roles is indicative of this problem. Attracting the right talent to police leadership must therefore be a key objective for both individual forces and national bodies such as the College of Policing.

Good governance across policing networks

Several attendees suggested that a current problem with radical change or partnership working within public services is that often insufficient thought is given to the development of new governance structures. The PCC model means that robust governance is rooted

constitutionally at the force level, whereas cross force collaborations can suffer from weak governance in the absence of an appropriate framework.

The example of Regional Organised Crime Units (ROCU) was given. For any given ROCU, there may be up to six of seven chief officers delegated to overseeing it. There is a danger this can lead to weak and confused lines of accountability and poor strategic oversight.

Innovation vs. accountability: the importance of having 'permission to fail'

Finally, attendees noted the tension between accountability and innovation. If oversight mechanisms are too heavy handed, then the pace of change can be inhibited and in some cases will even grind to a halt – regardless of individual PCCs' desire for reform.

For example, there were concerns that HMIC can criticise forces for neglecting certain areas, when in reality PCCs and chiefs have chosen not to prioritise them. The threat of inspection can result in organisations 'playing it safe', for fear of criticism if things go wrong.

It was argued that the freedom to innovate is required on the frontline as well as amongst police leaders. Excessive levels of scrutiny have the potential to result in a de-skilled workforce which is forced to act with lower levels of autonomy. Frontline officers were said to sometimes lack confidence to try out new ideas for fear of negative consequences. Changing the policing culture from one which promotes adherence to process and procedure, to a new ethos focused on problem solving will require officers to be given more

freedom to make their own decisions – coupled with more training to ensure they are well-equipped to deal with higher levels of autonomy. However, it will also require a mature conversation between the police service and those who hold it to account, recognising that organisations require a certain leeway to experiment, fail and learn from mistakes.

It was argued that while agile working is increasingly becoming the norm across the private sector and even some parts of Government, within a traditionally hierarchical profession like policing this cultural shift continues to present a significant challenge.

Conclusion

Despite the challenges raised within the session attendees were keen to highlight that in the short time they have been in existence PCCs have achieved significant change. Policing is now much more transparent and accountable to the public it serves and widespread innovation is occurring, which is both good for the public purse and for public satisfaction. There was also significant optimism from the Commissioners present who had just entered their second term. Not only was there a feeling that they understood their role and the expectations upon them much more clearly, but there was also a sense that they had greater levels of buy-in from their communities and colleagues. This, it was felt, was a recipe for even greater success in the years ahead.

A final key insight from the discussion was that while innovation is an important force for good it is not, in and of itself, necessarily a positive outcome. For PCCs it is vital therefore that underlying all decision making must be the aim of improving police effectiveness for the benefit of the public.

With thanks

The Police Foundation and Barrow Cadbury Fund would like to thank all of our speakers and attendees for their contributions to this session. Any further comments or feedback is very welcome and should be directed to **liz.crowhurst@police-foundation.org.uk**.
