

The briefing

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Safer school partnerships

This Police Foundation Briefing provides an introduction to Safer School Partnerships, examining their purpose and effectiveness, and draws attention to some of the key issues.

Introduction

In the 1980s, poor discipline and unruly pupil behaviour within schools became a prominent public and political issue in England and Wales. In November 1987 the Professional Association of Teachers⁽¹⁾ asked the Prime Minister to set up a committee of enquiry to look at discipline in schools and a year later Lord Elton was appointed to Chair the enquiry⁽²⁾. Over the next few years concerns continued to be raised about the impact of disruptive behaviour in schools on levels of academic achievement and a number of very rare but high-profile incidents attracted considerable media attention.

This culminated in 1995 with the murder of Philip Lawrence, head teacher of a London comprehensive school, by a 15 year old pupil from a nearby school. The subsequent debate focused, among other things, on the need to provide better security in and around schools which ultimately led, in 2002, to the deployment of police officers within schools. This briefing looks at the increasing involvement of police officers in and around schools and in particular the development of Safer School Partnerships (SSPs).

What are Safer School Partnerships?

Before SSPs were introduced, police presence in most schools amounted to little more than the provision of occasional lessons and responding to calls about incidents. The introduction of SSPs has resulted in a greater police presence in schools and a step-change in school-police relations.

There are now some 450 SSPs operating throughout England and Wales, mostly as an integral part of Neighbourhood Policing.

In practice, SSPs constitute a formal agreement between the police, a school (or group of schools) and other agencies to work together to keep young people safe, reduce crime and the fear of crime, and improve behaviour in and around a school or cluster of schools. The underlying assumption is that by reducing bullying, truancy and exclusions from school, SSPs will impact indirectly on offending and antisocial behaviour. Generally involving a police officer or PCSO working in a school or number of schools on a full or part time basis, they also aim to intervene early with children and young people at risk of offending and improve relations between pupils, the police and the wider community.

SSPs adopt a number of different approaches according to local circumstances. These range from one police officer covering several schools, to more intensive approaches where the police work as part of a multi-agency partnership attached to a cluster of schools, usually one secondary school and three or four feeder primaries. The first pilots were launched in 2002, with the deployment of up to 100 police officers in schools in 34 Local Education Authorities (LEAs) deemed to be facing the 'toughest challenges'. These LEAs fell within

ten 'crime hot-spot' areas that were identified as having a high incidence of youth offending, truancy and antisocial behaviour.

The head teacher and his or her staff retain responsibility for school discipline and most behaviour, with the police providing advice and support as well as a physical presence. Individual officers retain considerable discretion as to how and when to intervene to enforce the law, but are usually reluctant to do so unless a serious offence has been committed. They are more commonly involved in activities such as helping to improve security; developing effective channels for reporting bullying and other forms of victimisation; reviewing the safety of pupils' journeys to and from school; and patrolling the school corridors and grounds. Other activities include running breakfast clubs; undertaking classroom checks and truancy sweeps; and helping out during breaks and after school.

In the Metropolitan Police Service, all SSP officers receive intensive training, covering a range of subjects including officers' roles and responsibilities, typical offences, searching of pupils, partnership working and liaising with youth offending teams. In some schools, officers undertake various forms of conflict resolution, which have been found to have a positive impact on pupil relationships and their feelings of safety, and in some areas SSPs are now used to identify early signs of radicalisation and prevent violent extremism.

Updated guidance⁽³⁾ was issued in 2009 by the Department for Children, Schools and Families⁽⁴⁾, the Home Office, the Youth Justice Board (YJB) and the Association of Chief Police Officers (ACPO)⁽⁵⁾. It replaces initial guidance issued in 2002⁽⁶⁾, which introduced a broad range of powers to prevent and tackle poor behaviour in schools, including a statutory power to discipline pupils and wider powers to

detain and search pupils and confiscate items. The Guidance sets out what SSPs are, what benefits they bring, and how to set up and maintain one. It recommends that all schools should benefit from SSPs, irrespective of their problems, reflecting the recommendations of the Youth Crime Action Plan, published in 2008. This cross-departmental plan promises that every school will eventually have a named police contact and encourages the expansion of SSPs so that they become the norm⁽⁷⁾.

A 2009 survey shows over 5,000 schools are involved in some form of SSP⁽⁸⁾.

Why were Safer School Partnerships introduced?

SSPs were originally introduced to improve the security and safety of staff and pupils in and around schools. The idea originates in part from the US, where police officers routinely patrol the corridors of public high schools. Following a number of high profile shootings in the 1990s, a range of security measures were introduced into schools in the US (including metal detectors, CCTV cameras and police patrols) and there are more than 17,000 officers serving in American schools⁽⁹⁾. The adoption of the idea of placing police officers in schools is an example of a broader trend of borrowing law enforcement initiatives from across the Atlantic.

In 2002 the British government expressed concerns about increasing truancy rates and school related crime. It was believed that, as in the US, the police could play a greater role in tackling these problems and in April 2002 a protocol was issued by the Department for Education encouraging schools to develop better relationships with the police⁽¹⁰⁾.

Are Safer School Partnerships necessary?

About one in four school pupils is involved in offending in any year⁽¹¹⁾ and most school children experience bullying at some stage⁽¹²⁾. Some schools are high crime risk environments for children and there is increasing concern about the carrying of weapons in schools. This is supported by survey evidence that shows that one per cent of school children attending schools in Inner London report carrying a real gun and six per cent report carrying replicas and air guns in the previous year⁽¹³⁾. High profile incidents are rare, but when they do occur they often disproportionately affect the whole school community.

Every day there are three arson attacks in schools across the UK, half of which occur in school hours and the cost of which was estimated at over £100m in 2001⁽¹⁴⁾.

Despite the prevalence of bullying, low level offending and other safety issues, most schools are well-ordered, relatively crime free places. According to Sir Alan Steer's report on behaviour in schools carried out in 2009, the main problem is persistent low-level disruption, which twenty years ago was almost entirely dealt with by teaching staff⁽¹⁵⁾. Since then, the erosion of adult authority and the decline of informal social control have led to an increasing reliance on more formal sources of social control of which the introduction of SSPs is a prime example. Sir Alan Steer's report makes a number of recommendations for giving teachers statutory powers to exercise greater authority in schools. These include clarifying the right of schools to discipline pupils and impose sanctions for breaches of school rules or other unacceptable behaviour both in school

and beyond the school's grounds; and giving teachers powers to search for weapons, stolen property and drugs without pupils' consent.

Following this report the 2010 Schools White Paper⁽¹⁶⁾ set out plans to introduce new legislation including the extension of teachers' powers to search pupils to cover 'any item which may cause disorder or pose a threat to safety' as well as the power to remove children physically from class, to give detentions without parental notice and to use reasonable force. Currently schools are more likely to call the police than to conduct a search themselves when they suspect a pupil is carrying a weapon and, although the planned legislation reflects the Steer report and hands over greater responsibility to teachers, concerns have been raised about teacher safety and the potential risk of an increase in false accusations of assault. The Education Select Committee⁽¹⁷⁾ also heard evidence about the potential invasions of pupil privacy if searches were to become routine rather than evidence-based⁽¹⁸⁾.

The Education Bill 2010-11, which is based on the White Paper, is currently passing through Parliament. It includes some of the proposals outlined in the Schools White Paper, including the introduction of new powers to search for specific items that school staff reasonably suspect have been or are likely to be used to commit an offence, cause personal injury or cause damage to property. The Bill also widens the list of items that school staff can confiscate (including mobile phones) and abolishes the requirement to give 24 hours notice before imposing a detention. However the proposals to give teachers the powers to use greater force, including physically removing children from classes, are not included in the Bill.

Are Safer School Partnerships effective?

An early evaluation of the SSP pilots (11 SSP schools and two non-SSP schools) showed little improvement over a six month period in bullying, truanting, substance misuse, antisocial behaviour and victimisation, or in pupils' feelings of safety⁽¹⁹⁾. The pilots took some time to set up – in some cases too long for any measurable impact to occur – and in some schools police officers were made unwelcome and/or became isolated. The evaluation identified a number of early barriers to effective implementation, including lack of clarity around roles, responsibilities, management and supervision arrangements and clashes between different professional cultures, particularly between teachers and the police. These could, however, be overcome with the active personal involvement of senior managers and clear protocols to which all parties signed up.

In a subsequent evaluation of a larger number of schools over a longer period of time, conducted by the University of York (15 SSP schools and 15 non SSP schools), improvements were recorded in truancy and victimisation rates and pupils' feelings of safety, although not in academic achievement (as measured by exam results) or the rate of permanent exclusions⁽²⁰⁾.

The best SSPs could deliver a benefit: cost ratio of over 18:1; in other words, for every £1 spent on the programme the estimated benefit would be more than £18⁽²¹⁾.

In a slightly different but much larger initiative in Scotland, where 55 police officers were based in 65 secondary schools across six police forces, the placing of police officers in schools also initially raised concerns about the role of police officers, how their presence would be perceived by the local community and whether it would adversely affect the school's reputation. There were concerns too about using the police for gathering local intelligence and enforcing school discipline. The evaluation, however, demonstrated that initial resistance to the idea receded once teaching staff and pupils fully understood the role of police officers and were reassured about their functions. In terms of impact, there were clear signs of improvement in pupils' feelings of safety and some evidence of a reduction in criminal activity. Unfortunately the absence of control groups meant it was not possible to attribute these findings solely to the presence of police officers⁽²²⁾.

When setting up an SSP, it is important to secure buy-in from senior management and ensure that clear information-sharing protocols are in place. Building on pre-existing good relations with individual known police officers who have an aptitude for and commitment to working with children and young people helps to secure successful implementation. It is also important to ensure that common stereotypes are challenged to help police officers become fully accepted and trusted by staff and pupils alike. This often means that officers spend much of their time engaging in proactive initiatives, such as after-school clubs, and use restorative rather than simple law enforcement techniques for improving school safety.

What the actual project is trying to do is create a brand new image of the police being an effective but supportive body, giving young people a trust for them in the future' (Head Teacher, Gala Grange)⁽²³⁾.

The success of SSPs depends heavily on the expertise of the police officers and their ability to work with other professionals to deliver a joined-up service. Officers need to be self-aware, understood and valued⁽²⁴⁾ and sustain their desire and enthusiasm to be involved in schools. They need to have the interpersonal skills required for effectively engaging with pupils. Actively encouraging discussions between pupils from different backgrounds on issues such as personal safety, appropriate behaviour and victim awareness can contribute towards this. A recent study undertaken by the National Foundation for Educational Research lists all the ingredients for setting up a successful SSP⁽²⁵⁾.

The social landscapes of children who offend are often characterised by acute disadvantage and marginalisation, so officers need to be aware of the background factors that shape pupils' lives, whether as victims, offenders or both⁽²⁶⁾. The victimisation of children and young people is a powerful predictor of offending behaviour and vice versa⁽²⁷⁾, which means that, in the school environment, conflicts and their underlying causes are particularly amenable to restorative interventions. Teachers and SSP practitioners should also draw on other constructive responses to deal with feelings of helplessness, blame and anger, and desires for revenge and retaliation that emerge from conflicts, victimisation or problematic behaviour⁽²⁸⁾.

Effective policing of the local community can also have an influence on the ethos of the school. Evidence shows a correlation between high crime areas and high crime schools and that the reverse is also true: schools in low crime areas have lower levels of victimisation⁽²⁹⁾. Schools are in this way reflective of their wider community and the police need to focus on the community outside the school as well as on behaviour in the school.

Some key issues

Diversion or criminalisation?

The statutory guidance for SSP officers and other agencies states that *'the officer remains an operational police officer and will make his or her own decisions on when and how to intervene in incidents when the law is threatened'*⁽³⁰⁾. This means that there is considerable scope for SSP officers to exercise their discretion when incidents arise. On the one hand, an SSP officer can refer incidents to school staff, affirming traditional responses to problematic behaviour such as verbal discipline, 'time out', detention or letters home to parents. On the other hand, an SSP officer can choose to arrest and detain a pupil, effectively triggering that child or young person's involvement in the youth justice system.

It is important to recognise that 'discipline' does not directly refer to the management of poor behaviour, but also involves the promotion of good behaviour⁽³¹⁾. Effective pupil discipline also relies on the ability of teachers and officers to understand disruptive behaviour from the pupil's point of view⁽³²⁾. This requires an understanding of the triggers of such behaviour and the background context or environment in which such behaviour occurs, as well as what its consequences might be. Due to their

on-going relationship with pupils, teachers are often best placed to understand the origins and causes of problematic behaviour in the classroom and wider school environment. It is important therefore that SSP officers use their presence in schools to reinforce the authority of teachers and school staff, not replace it. With the exception of serious incidents that may require police involvement⁽³³⁾, officers should, on the whole, not be used as a back-up disciplinary tool for problematic students. The new statutory powers for teaching staff proposed by the current government in the 2010-2011 Education Bill (see above) will help to reinforce this.

One of the findings from the York evaluation⁽³⁴⁾ was the need for a co-ordinated policy for SSPs on pupil behaviour, outlining how different incidents should be handled and setting down processes for staff and police to ensure a response is proportionate. At a minimum, this should include deciding on when to bring an officer into a classroom to deal with an incident and how to ensure that such incidents are resolved consistently and without prejudice. This requires SSP agencies to agree with local neighbourhood police teams how incidents involving pupils will be addressed – either informally by the school itself or formally through summary or criminal justice disposals.

It may also be appropriate for SSP agencies to agree an exit or de-intensification strategy. This entails reducing the amount or intensity of police officer engagement with a school or group of schools once demonstrable improvements in attendance and behaviour have been established. This can help to avoid police officers continuing to be involved in schools when their presence is no longer needed, allowing local neighbourhood police teams to allocate their resources to other priorities.

Interventions on the basis of 'risk'

The Youth Justice Board's approach to 'risk' emphasises individual and familial factors such as peer group associations, parenting styles, alcohol and drug misuse, and poor mental health as predictors of offending behaviour⁽³⁵⁾. While these 'risk factors' play some part in contributing to problematic, antisocial or offending behaviour, these behaviours are also rooted in 'macro' factors such as social exclusion, deprivation and lack of access to high quality education and employment opportunities⁽³⁶⁾. Targeting pupils on the basis of individual risk factors runs the risk of drawing pupils into formal surveillance whose actions may otherwise not attract attention from teachers and school authorities. One way of avoiding this is to ensure that interventions are *responsive* (resulting from specific incidents or actions) rather than *presumptive* (the belief that a pupil 'may' become involved in problematic behaviour).

Safer School Partnerships and PREVENT

In addition to the core objectives of SSPs outlined by the YJB, the statutory guidance makes frequent references to safeguarding children 'at risk of violent extremism'⁽³⁷⁾. This links in to the Coalition Government's 2011 PREVENT counter-terrorism strategy. Under the Channel Project (part of PREVENT) schools should identify and refer information on individuals who might be involved in violent extremism. The project makes a risk assessment, following which the individual pupil might be subject to a number of interventions. A Preventing Extremism Unit has been established within the Department of Education and OFSTED Inspectors will identify areas of weakness around safeguarding children from extremism.

The PREVENT strategy, like the YJB approach, is concerned with risk factors pointing towards future behaviour. ACPO listed examples of possible factors which might make a pupil vulnerable to violent extremism⁽³⁸⁾, such as peer pressure, identity confusion, or underachievement. Many of these factors will arise in 'normal' school children and there will be only very subtle differences detectable in a vulnerable child. The concern with this approach is that children from particular backgrounds or ethnic groups might be targeted as 'ones to watch' more than others.

A 2009 report by the Institute of Race Relations⁽³⁹⁾ raised this aspect of SSPs as giving cause for concern. One of the report's interviewees stated that the Channel project was 'merely identifying 'naughty Muslims' rather than genuine cases' and another stated: 'Badly behaved young persons who happen to be Muslim or who have said something in anger then become known to the system as 'at risk'. Discriminatory measures like this can be counter-productive, leading to a pupil feeling singled out and exposing him or her to a greater risk of bullying or segregation. The approach also seems at odds with fundamental aspects of education such as critical thinking, objective assessment and respect for the views of others. Teachers need to be able to encourage students to express and debate their views openly and freely and children must be able to trust that they will not endanger themselves by expressing a viewpoint on a political or religious issue.

Work with children and with schools is an important part of the PREVENT strategy, which seeks to support those at risk of radicalisation. However great care needs to be taken to ensure a proportionate response.

The future of Safer School Partnerships

The Police Reform and Social Responsibility Bill, which received Royal Assent in September 2011⁽⁴⁰⁾, means that from next year every police force will be accountable to an elected Police and Crime Commissioner. This will be the first time in the history of British policing that local policing priorities will be determined by a directly elected individual at the local level. Alongside this, following the government's Spending Review⁽⁴¹⁾, the police service will have to manage close to a 20 per cent reduction in funding from central government over the next four years. With 80 per cent of the police budget going towards staff costs, this is likely to lead to a reduction in frontline officers. Thus the future of SSPs, like many areas of policing, will come under scrutiny as Police Forces across the country adapt to the changing financial and legislative environment they are now facing.

Given these new developments, it is important to consider how the spirit of SSPs might be maintained even if police officers were deployed away from the role. This might range from having an explicitly-identified liaison person in both the school and the local police so that communication could be continued, albeit with less officer face time, to putting schools onto the beat of neighbourhood policing teams so that they are regularly visited and pupils remain accustomed to seeing police or PCSO uniforms around.

Conclusion

Good SSPs can improve feelings of safety as well as reducing truancy and victimisation rates; however they depend heavily on the aptitude of individual officers. Officers need to have good interpersonal skills and be able to work with the school, deferring to staff authority on non-criminal matters of school discipline.

One concern is that although the original purpose of introducing police presence in schools was the reduction of crime and antisocial behaviour, the role has been widened to encompass identification of risk factors pointing towards future bad behaviour or extremism. This area should be approached with caution – identification is a difficult task requiring appropriate training and understanding of the triggers to disruptive behaviour as well as some knowledge of child psychology. Care must be taken to ensure that children do not feel discriminated against or labelled because of their family background.

Finally, it is worth remembering that most schools are well-ordered, crime-free environments where children come to learn and that some level of disruption should be viewed as normal childish behaviour rather than a sign of future criminality.

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