

Police prioritisation: How should the police choose what matters most in a changing world?

Background

The world in which the police are operating is rapidly changing. While previously crime-fighting has been centred around reducing high volume crimes such as robbery, burglary and low level violence, now demand has shifted to more complex offences. Often hidden behind closed doors or committed online, these new forms of criminality ask fresh questions of forces more accustomed to traditional response policing.

In addition, at the same time, the police must decide how to deal with an increase in non-crime demand, for example in the form of searching for missing people or helping individuals experiencing mental distress. These significant changes in the police's day-to-day work require not only different types of resources, but also a rethinking of how the police workforce and operating model is structured to cope with these emerging threats.

Over the last Parliament, policing also faced another significant challenge in the form of radical financial cuts. While until the end of the 2000s spending broadly increased in line with

changes in need, between 2010 and 2015 forces saw on average a reduction of 20 per cent in central government funding. As a result, over the same period, the total police workforce fell from 244,497 to 207,140 – a decline of just over 15 per cent.

With budgets tight and demand increasing, police forces have been under growing pressure to take tough decisions about how resources will be deployed. In particular, due to significant reductions in frontline officers it is becoming more and more difficult to continue to provide a universal offering to the public they serve. Instead, police leaders are faced with stopping or reducing their involvement in certain activities – and all while trying to maintain public confidence levels.

Against this difficult backdrop, deciding what matters most and therefore where resources should be targeted is a key question facing policing today, and one which requires further attention. In the first of a series of policy dinners in partnership with KPMG, attendees explored this issue. The session began by considering the importance of prioritisation.

Why do we prioritise?

There was a broad consensus among attendees that prioritisation is an important part of making sure limited public resources are used wisely. In particular, it provides an opportunity for agencies to consider how the greatest impacts can be achieved and to effectively target interventions and staff towards the right people.

It was also agreed that prioritisation is an important mechanism through which public organisations can reflect the desires of the people they serve. This in turn enables organisations to be held to account for delivering – or failing to deliver – against these clearly stated objectives.

In policing, it was highlighted that this is particularly true in the case of democratically elected Police and Crime Commissioners (PCCs). In order to attract a democratic mandate, PCCs necessarily identify the things the public view as policing priorities in their manifestos and their subsequent Police and Crime Plans – which are also subject to open public consultation. In this context, the public can then directly hold PCCs to account for keeping these promises through deciding whether they should be re-elected at the end of their term.

Finally, it was agreed that the process of prioritisation allows organisations to set out their values and mission to the public. Within policing, in recent years, this mission has focused around targeting resources to reduce threat, harm and risk – particularly to the most vulnerable.

Need for clarity in the face of complexity

Attendees highlighted that overlaying the twin threats of increased demand and reduced resources is a complex web of different governance arrangements. In addition to operational objectives outlined by Chief

Constables, priorities are also set by PCCs (most notably through their Police and Crime Plans), areas inspected by Her Majesty's Inspectorate of Constabulary and national priorities and initiatives laid out by the Home Office and National Police Chiefs' Council. Add to this at a local level, neighbourhood policing teams who may have particular focuses in their wards – and perhaps most importantly individual officers tasked with taking decisions in the face of conflicting demands – and it is clear that prioritisation is occurring at multiple levels and with numerous, often competing aims being played off against one another.

Attendees suggested an important consequence of these governance structures is that an inherent tension exists between a growing operational focus on high-harm and vulnerability and ensuring that elected officials – who need to attract a democratic mandate – meet public expectations. This can be problematic given citizens' concerns often centre on low-level volume crimes such as speeding and antisocial behaviour, which are more visible in their day to day lives than hidden harms which are occurring in the private realm, such as child sexual exploitation and domestic violence.

Looking ahead, these governance structures are only set to get more complicated. In particular, attendees highlighted the current move towards police/fire integration and the proposals for specialist capabilities to be placed at a regional rather than force level. It was argued that moving forward, balancing local, regional and national priorities will be an essential step towards effective prioritisation.

In addition, it was contended that the involvement of multiple parties in the process of prioritisation has led to the proliferation of named priorities within forces. Attendees argued that in some cases a situation has developed where everything is a priority and therefore in practice nothing is. It was suggested that naming priorities in internal or even external policy documents

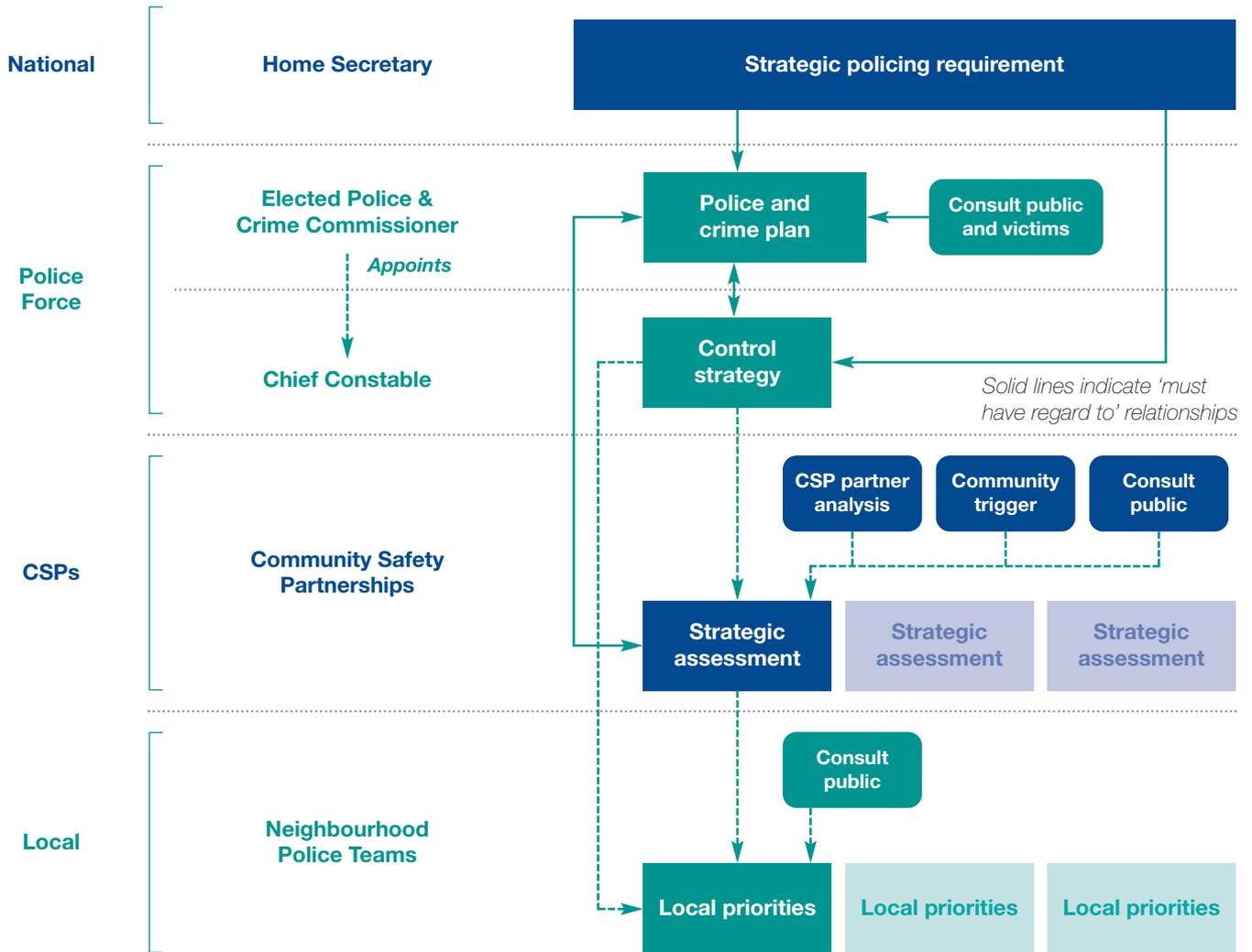


Figure 1: Police priority setting flow chart

can sometimes be a symbolic exercise rather than meaning that an issue is being given special attention by a force or PCC. Some attendees also suggested that name checking issues (particularly those of political interest) as a strategic priority can at times be a way of avoiding criticism from politicians, the Inspectorate, the media and the public. This again undermines the purpose of prioritisation and more importantly targeting resources towards those experiencing the most harm.

Finally, it was argued that where large numbers of strategic and operational priorities are set there is the potential for confusion to trickle down the ranks resulting in frontline officers feeling unsure about what

current priorities are. Clarity surrounding forces' priorities is therefore an essential first step towards the effective deployment of resources.

An absence of evidence

There was also consensus among attendees that our empirical understanding of demand, costs and effectiveness is still too patchy. It was suggested that for many forces it is imperative to carry out some initial work to gather data on where demand lies, what activities are being carried out by different staff, what the deployment of different resources actually costs and most importantly which activities lead to improved outcomes.

Without this baseline of data on demand and performance, it was argued that measuring the success of prioritisation decisions – and justifying particularly tough ones – is virtually impossible. At the moment, it can be hugely challenging for police leaders to provide a rationale for not doing certain activities or diverting resources to others – particularly when this involves moving publicly visible officers away from the frontline.

Encouragingly, attendees heard that attempts are being made within some forces to carry out these kinds of exercises. Norfolk and Suffolk, for example, have created a detailed end-to-end activity baseline which lays out key areas of expenditure, activities and key outcomes. This information is being used as a vital part of their budgeting processes to ensure that the force gets the biggest ‘bang for their buck’.

Of course, the process of gathering and evaluating the sheer depth and breadth of this kind of information is not without its challenges. First, it is necessary to have the appropriate skills within the police workforce to carry out the analysis. Attendees highlighted the significant cost of hiring good analysts and the problems with attracting these candidates due to the appetite for these skills in the private market.

Second, there are also issues with defining and evaluating outcomes. While tracking the success of the police’s response to volume crimes is relatively simple (falls in recorded crime and more importantly the Crime Survey of England and Wales have previously been relatively sufficient) identifying reductions in hidden harm is much more complex. This is an issue that will need to be addressed in order for forces to get a true picture of the demand they are facing, and in particular, their success in tackling higher harm crimes.

Time for a fresh conversation?

Views were mixed among attendees about the most effective way to handle conflicts between public

expectations for visible policing and selecting priorities based on the reduction of high-harm offending.

Some attendees suggested that there is a need for bravery among police leaders to take some of these unpopular decisions. Removing resources from affluent areas, for example, is likely – at least initially – to lead to some form of backlash from those who live there.

For others, however, it was argued that confronting the public with the reality of the challenges facing forces may be one way to shift their focus away from their own day-to-day concerns. This could include greater emphasis on the reality of the government cuts to the police budget and most importantly, the impact this has had on both officer numbers and the wellbeing of current serving officers. In Hampshire, for example, PCC Michael Lane and Chief Constable Olivia Pinkney have recently taken this step and publicly stated that the future of their force may be at risk without changes to their current funding arrangements.

In addition, the lack of public knowledge about the day to day work of frontline officers was raised as a barrier to widespread support for resources being diverted to specific priorities. It was suggested that in this context, the sharing of body-worn video clips (with the appropriate privacy safeguards) or providing personal accounts of officers average days in the force could provide a window into police work. Greater transparency about particular crime problems in certain locations was also highlighted as an additional way to challenge the views many of the public hold about what constitutes everyday police work.

Alongside identifying the challenges which often stand in the way of effective prioritisation, attendees also highlighted some emerging tools which may make these tasks easier in the future.

Data-powered prioritisation

First, attendees agreed that technology, and in particular the power of big data, could be harnessed

by forces to make the task of prioritisation easier. For example, predictive analytics can identify individuals who are most at risk of offending or becoming victims of high-harm crimes. This makes it possible to concentrate not just resources – but the right resources – on the most vulnerable people. It was suggested that in order to do this effectively, forces must look beyond official crime statistics and consider softer forms of data and in particular evidence gathered by other agencies.

Second, an examination of historical data may prove insightful for modelling the impact of changes in future demand. If the unit cost of certain activities (for example investigating an online fraud or responding to missing people alerts) is understood better it may be possible to prepare for shifts in crime types more easily.

Professional expertise remains paramount

Finally, among all of the challenges and changes within policing, attendees emphasised the continued importance of professional judgement. It was highlighted that the ability to draw upon years of experience when faced with difficult issues on a day to day basis often has a value which cannot be quantified. In light of this, some attendees suggested that effective prioritisation may simply be providing frontline staff with the relevant evidence and a clear framework of values on which to base their decisions.

It was argued however, that even where frontline officers have these tools at their disposal, there will still be a need for the setting of strategic priorities by police leaders. In particular, as highlighted at the beginning of the discussions, a clear statement of priorities is required for forces to be held to account. Attendees suggested that prioritisation will therefore necessarily continue to occur at multiple levels as local, regional and national resources are balanced with local, regional and national demands.

Conclusion

Overall, there was a strong consensus among attendees that prioritisation is a hugely complex task and one which requires much greater consideration by those working in and around policing. In particular, it was agreed that forces desperately need better evidence on both the demand they are facing and the effectiveness of their interventions. Significant efforts should therefore be directed towards ensuring that forces can back-up tough decisions with relevant data. Only then can police leaders prove that they are deploying resources effectively for the benefit of both their officers and the public.

**Authored by Liz Crowhurst,
Policy Officer, Police Foundation**

With thanks

The Police Foundation and KPMG would like to thank all of our 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

About the Police Foundation

The Police Foundation is an independent think tank focused on developing knowledge and understanding of policing while challenging the police service and the government to improve policing for the benefit of the public. The Police Foundation acts as a bridge between the public, the police and the government, while being owned by none of them. www.police-foundation.org.uk

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