Management, measurement and performance: the impact of accountability in the Merseyside Police Service

Stewart Parkinson and Ian Marsh look at how the nature and shape of policing in general, and Merseyside Police in particular, has been driven by business practice and performance culturalism.

I n 1993 Kenneth Clarke, then Home Secretary, unveiled the future guiding values and principles that were to inform management of a public service largely viewed as autonomous and unaccountable. In essence the Home Office was to control the purse strings of a police service whose success criteria was now to be centrally determined. At the same time, the means to achieve success would be locally devolved to police authorities acting as the government's watchdogs: something that the police authorities had clamoured for over many years (Simey, 1988). These changes altered the traditional

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tripartite relationship of Home Secretary, chief constable and police authority. The power of the Home Secretary and central government had increased with the *Police and Magistrates' Courts Act 1994* with a unique legal obligation placed upon each police service to prepare a costed local policing plan that also met with centrally determined key objectives and performance indicators. On Merseyside, this led to the development of area and departmental plans that required demonstrable evidence of performance. As a result, indicators of speed of response, numbers of arrests and stop/ searches and reductions in reported crime became commonplace *(Merseyside Policing Plan 1996/ 97)*.

Central objectives versus local priorities

The resulting tension between the policing priorities identified by local communities and the nationally determined objectives of central government was becoming increasingly fractious as evidenced by local surveys (DOCSA. 1995). One example that proved particularly troublesome was that of localised drug dealing. With the advent of local business plans and the creation of autonomous local superintendents, effectiveness and progression were to be judged against performance indicators or 'area goals'. Little advantage was to be gained in tackling deep-seated, expensive and complex drug problems with reduced levels of personnel, particularly when the opportunities for making large in-roads into high-volume, repeat, acquisitive crime such as household burglary, stolen cheques and car-crime would prove more lucrative and pertinent to their customer base, and more importantly to their area goals.

The subsequent proliferation of national operations with a localised focus, such as 'Bumblebee' on household burglary, and 'zero-tolerance' campaigns on housing estates, flourished (Sharples, 1997). However, as many of these operations often only tackled the effects of much deeper seated problems, for example the theft of property to fund drug addiction, local communities and consequently local police commanders were becoming increasingly concerned that the real focus was being lost (Crowther, 1998). As a result, some of the more senior and confident of the Area Commanders decided to take autonomous action to placate their own communities by initiating local operational projects often dealing with public disorder and nuisances.

This type of operation often proved expensive. However, in the new managerial world of Area Command it was now possible to make centralised bids for extra resources that would be provided for by their area colleagues; 'top-slicing' as it became known. The rationale for this meritocracy was that the Area Commanders or the Organisational Business Group would mutually support and finance worthy projects of their colleagues. Unfortunately, the more astute Area Commander was often looking to shunt crime problems onto neighbouring police areas.

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Privatisation and creeping corporatism

An important theme underlying these changes in policing has been the degree of resistance offered by the police, most notably by the Association of Chief Police Officers, (ACPO), and the Police Federation (PF).

Increased civilianisation, street patrol management, crime management units and a more focused utilisation of the Special Constabulary were some of the initiatives that met with large-scale resistance from regular full-time police. The increased level of civilian staff and the more intensive

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use of the Special Constabulary were viewed as serious threats to their own conditions of service and institutionalised 'perks', for example, overtime, retirement posts and lateral career development. However, the logic of better use of resources and a corresponding concentration on core issue policing could no longer be denied. And it has been the emphasis on resources that has driven police re-structuring, both nationally and on Merseyside.

By the end of 1993 a Home Office review team led by Ingrid Posen was set up to examine the most cost-effective way of delivering core police services and 'outsourcing' ancillary tasks. The introduction of Compulsory Competitive Tendering (CCT), contracting-out, and the development of service level agreements meant that gardening, canteen, legal and other support services were now to be removed from police functions as were information technology, personnel functions and training, and the promise of further inroads into ancillary functions. This 'hollowing-out' process was aimed at reducing the costs of some of the more inefficient forces, particularly the larger metropolitan services that consisted of too many supervisory ranks.

The change of Merseyside Police Authority to a freestanding corporate body with new statutory powers and responsibilities attracted a budget that was now to be reduced by £19million over a four-year period. All this after a 50% increase in police spending between 1979 and 1989. As a result, since 1993, the number of police posts had been reduced by over 400 (Merseyside Police, 1997). Most of these had been at Chief Superintendent, Chief Inspector and Inspector ranks, although some Sergeant posts were lost. Similarly, civilian support staff associations were asked to identify 180 posts to be shed under the internal Civilian Manpower Review.

The effects were to place greater managerial responsibility on the more junior supervisory ranks, both police and civilian, who were (theoretically) empowered to make more responsible decisions at ground level. Many of these officers simply viewed this as an abrogation of responsibility by their senior colleagues, who, with the advent of

management consultants and governmental watchdogs, were reshaping their roles for management and strategy and increasingly distancing themselves from operational command (DOCSA 1995).

The upshot of this was too few staff at the operational end, with vastly reduced levels of supervision and management facing an ever increasing workload from a more demanding public (Merseyside Police, 1997).

Problem solving in partnership with a new government

One of the major themes of the Labour political manifesto of 1997 had been 'tough on crime, tough on the causes of crime'. Merseyside Police anticipated the future government's response to crime management and their emphasis on partnership approaches and collaboration. It also suited Merseyside Police's intention to move from a debilitated command and control model of policing to a more graded problem-solving model.

This policing approach focuses on solving the underlying causes of problems as well as dealing with the symptoms of those problems, and embraces the concept of partnership working (Merseyside Police, 1997). In practice, it meant a graded response to calls from the public, which would prioritise and inevitably reduce the police response.

The message to the public, though not explicitly made, was that the police can no longer solve your problems alone, they need help and assistance in doing so. In addition, for some types of incidents the police would no longer provide a service, but would give assistance in finding someone who would, and would work in partnership with other agencies and the public in prevention and reduction. The police were no longer equipped to fight crime alone, but sought a role in managing the resources for its prevention.

Similarly, the government proposed to tackle crime in a partnership fashion. A new legislative arrangement was proposed whereby local authorities, police, probation and other organisations would be required by law to formulate crime reduction and prevention plans for each

local authority area *Crime and Disorder Act 1998*. Should they fail to do so, or reach their performance indicators (now to be known as ministerial priorities), there would be financial penalties or privatisation of services.

In conclusion, it would appear that the police service has been living on borrowed time, certainly in the view of recent governments. It also appears that the pressure for managerial reform has been mounting since 1979, and that earlier coercive measures of a Thatcherite government have now been replaced by legislative requirements of New Labour.

The political stakes are high for all concerned. The police service is very well aware of the negative consequences of non-achievement and the number of private organisations waiting in the wings should they so fail. The charge towards managerialism has alienated both police and public alike, and the increasingly overt political agenda of reduced police funding in favour of privatisation has been cloaked as partnership and collaboration.

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