

# Independent Advisory Groups

Rosemary Drewery describes the purpose and guidelines of the independent groups that advise the Metropolitan Police.

The Stephen Lawrence Inquiry report criticised the Metropolitan Police Service for the loss of contact with communities, particularly black communities. One of the police responses to this criticism was the establishment of the Independent Advisory Group in January 1999. The formation of the Lesbian Gay Bisexual Transgender Advisory Group followed in February 2000, following the excellent relationship with the community that was forged during investigation into the bombing of the Admiral Duncan pub in Soho.

These two groups are now a source of advice to the Metropolitan Police, advising on how to deal best with the concerns of the diverse communities of London. The advice is co-ordinated through the Racial and Violent Crime Task Force. Independent Advisory groups have been acknowledged as good practice by Her Majesty's Inspector of Constabulary in his reports *Policing London - Winning Consent* and the series that comprise *Winning the Race*.

## ***For independent advice to be most effective it must inform every stage of the decision-making process.***

The Metropolitan Police have accepted the key challenges to: learn the lessons from the tragic death of Stephen Lawrence; understand the needs and concerns of minority communities and other hard to reach groups and respond accordingly; adopt an approach to policing that incorporates our partners and other agencies so that we address hate crime and incidents in the most effective way; learn from the experiences of minority communities that hate crimes cause great suffering and on some occasions, result in murder.

Advisory groups fulfil a different purpose to other groups, such as Police Community Consultative Groups, that tend to assist police at a local strategic level. Independent advice can provide a much more immediate contact with the community on specific issues.

The goals and purpose of independent advice are to provide communication with people who are not usually in dialogue with police. Besides the groups already mentioned there are for example asylum seekers, the homeless etc. The greatest contribution independent advice can make is in preventing incidents escalating into more critical events or crimes. Advisors are able to anticipate how police responses to problems may be interpreted in communities and this information may lead to an

adjustment of the police response. In the event of a critical incident, independent advisors are able to explain how it is being perceived within the broader community so that police can respond in a way that ensures that issues can be addressed.

Advisors can give advice on: policy and strategy, critical incidents, major investigations, proposed police operations. They can help contact all parts of the community. The advice given is independent of the police. Independent advisors do not bear responsibility for the consequences of decisions based on their advice and the autonomy of the police decision-maker is not affected. Advisors should not be involved as mediators or advocates. A mediator or advocate is a non-police person who has tactical involvement in critical incidents, and is involved in interaction with victims, families and/or witnesses.

The police may or may not follow advice, however the dismissal of advice without giving reasons can be the cause of frustration and can be perceived as

disrespectful. Feedback to advisors is essential. Independent advice should be sought about an issue as soon as possible. For independent advice to be most effective it must inform every stage of the decision-making process. The continuing contributions of independent advisory groups ensure that police do not lose sight of community concerns.

The productive strengths of independent advice are as a source of critical appraisal of police actions, policies and practices from the perspective of members of minority communities who are receivers of police services. Ability and willingness to give constructive criticism and to identify options for resolutions of policing problems can be used at both strategic and tactical levels, and are essential in forging links and improving community-police relations.

A more sympathetic policing response can result from cooperative working between police and independent advisory groups. Effective communication can reduce fear by giving communities information necessary to protect themselves, while communities can help police to apprehend suspects by vigilance and providing information – results that would be of benefit to all.

Information supplied by DC Rosemary Drewery, Race & Violent Crime Task Force, Scotland Yard.