

# Enhancing accountability in local policing

John W Raine and Eileen Dunstan look at what makes an effective working partnership.

The word 'accountability' is usually present in most contemporary debate and discourse on public sector services, and the concept of strong accountability has generally come to be seen as a core principle for 'good governance'. However, quite what is implied in this regard is rarely explained or defined with any precision. Within policing, reference is often made in the context of accountability to the 'tripartite relationship' between the Home Secretary, the Police Authority and the Chief Constable, with the latter office holders able to enjoy operational independence, while Police Authorities (bodies of about twenty members in total, with a statutorily defined mix of councillors, magistrates and independent member) exist to ensure accountability in relation to local policing plans and their resourcing.

At the community level within each police force area there are also well-established (though not necessarily effective) accountability arrangements to ensure local people have opportunity to interact with local police commanders and to voice any concerns about crime and policing – these typically being known as 'Police-Community Consultative Groups' (PCCGs) or 'Police & Community Together' (PACT).

But concerns have been growing in recent years about an 'accountability gap' – between the community level and the police authority (force-wide) level. This 'gap' reflects the upward trend across the country in the size of policing sub-areas. For some years now, the number of police divisions or the 'basic command units' (BCUs) has been decreasing as chief constables have chosen to concentrate their police resources into fewer but larger units, each under the command of a more senior officer. In Thames Valley, for example, there are now just five BCUs, one of which covers the entire administrative county of Oxfordshire (i.e. of similar size to some of the smaller police forces in the country). And now the Home Office is pursuing a similar rationalisation at force level and has proposed a series of amalgamations of police forces to create fewer but larger 'strategic forces' in England and Wales. Quite apart from any concerns here about the implications in terms of the significant distancing with such strategic forces between local communities and the chief constable (for example, between towns at the peripheries of the force areas and headquarters), the further concern is of more and more responsibility now being passed down to the intermediate levels of BCUs or districts – where there are no formal arrangements for public accountability purposes.

Accordingly several police authorities have recently been exploring what might be done to plug this perceived 'accountability gap' by piloting the establishment of (non-statutory) panels at these intermediate levels – so exercising the holding to account function in relation to operational command units in the same way as police authorities are themselves expected to do at the force-wide level. More than this, the opportunity has been taken in many of the pilots to

widen the membership from that applying to police authorities so as to include a wider cross-section of people from the local communities – so trying to make them more representative of, and knowledgeable about, the areas in question.

## The Accountability pilots

For the past fifteen months, the Association of Police Authorities (APA) – the national body representing police authorities – has promoted and supported a series of twelve such 'accountability pilots' with the aim of assisting learning about how accountability at this level might best be enhanced. In September 2005, the University of Birmingham's School of Public Policy was commissioned to undertake an evaluation of the pilots to take stock of the progress made and to identify the key lessons learned to date (Raine, Dunstan and Patrick, 2005). An initial report was produced in December 2005 based on a review of five of the pilots – some being still in their infancy – and, at the time of writing, work continues in examining a further eight to provide a broader basis from which to highlight 'what works' best and why. Meanwhile, the Government has recently published its review of the *Crime and Disorder Act* – which focuses on the Crime & Disorder Reduction Partnership arrangements (CDRPs) that also occupy this intermediate level – these statutory partnerships being based on district council areas. The review has led to proposals to enhance the accountability of the CDRPs – with their responsibility for community safety in the local areas – by, among other moves, making them subject to scrutiny by local authorities. In so doing, the review signals a shift towards a greater involvement of local government in relation to community safety and policing at the local level.

The twelve 'accountability pilots' have each been devised for their own local context and circumstances and reflect decisions taken locally about their precise purposes, organisational arrangements and constitution. However, as all involve the formation of panels to operate at BCU or local police area levels, they have each had to address various common issues. Interestingly from a learning point of view, they have done so in some quite varied ways, particularly in relation to the functions and roles of the panels in terms of accountability, the constitution of their membership and their *modus operandi*.

## Differing functions of accountability

As indicated at the outset, the word accountability, while much used, is rarely precisely defined. But an important distinction in this context has been made by Stewart (1984) between 'managerial' and 'public' accountability – the former particularly focusing on issues of 'internal' control significance, such as performance and budgetary matters, the latter more focused on 'external' stakeholders and on aspects of interest and concern to them. In some of the 'accountability pilots' the focus has been more strongly focused on managerial performance, for example in scrutinising the crime figures and considering actual performance



in relation to targets set in the local policing plans. This has been characteristic, for example, of the pilots in South Wales, Staffordshire and Lancashire, reflected in limiting the panel membership (to police authority members, local councillors and a few other key personnel) to facilitate as expert an approach as possible to the analysis and interpretation of the crime statistics as a basis for holding the local commanders to account.

Elsewhere, however, the primary functions of the panels have been more about the involvement of local people and community representation to provide a stronger external perspective to the accountability process. Accordingly, the pilots at, for example, Islington and Hammersmith and Fulham in London involve significantly more people and draw on a wider range of organisations, with representation from a more diverse set of interest groups.

### Board or scrutiny panel?

Some of the panels have been constituted essentially on the classic 'company boardroom' principle of a mix of executive and non-executive members working together. In this case the executive members are the police commander and other chief officers involved in community safety work, notably the council chief executives, representatives from the health authority and fire authority, and the non-executives typically being members of the local community drawn, as indicated, from a range of

organisations and community groups. In other pilots, however, a conscious decision has been taken not to follow this 'round-the-table-together' model, but instead to establish an arms-length lay panel that exists to scrutinise and challenge the executive, in this case the local commander. At Rugby, for example, this 'scrutiny' model has been adopted from the local authority context where such processes have become a mandatory feature of local government policy-making and review processes and a formal mechanism for holding the executive to account. At Rugby a group of seven councillors and six co-optees from the community hold monthly panel sessions to which the local police commander is called to answer questions and to provide explanation for any apparent shortcomings and problems in policing the locality.

### Choosing the membership

Some panels have evidently taken more trouble than others to try and build legitimacy and representativeness into the constitution of their panels. Again, in this respect, the pilots sponsored by the Metropolitan Police Authority in Hammersmith and Fulham and in Islington, seem especially impressive for the breadth of representation achieved. In fact the boards here not only comprise some 20-25 members, largely drawn from the community, but follow a key underlying principle of seeking an 'active membership' to spread the reach and influence of the panel far beyond the 'attending membership' itself. Members are thus selected on the basis of their potential to consult and canvass members of their community to find out about the issues of concern and to bring them to the meetings, and then afterwards to feed back on the outcomes and actions agreed. Each member is seen as a conduit between the board and a wider group of citizens and the board itself is intended to be owned by the local community. Indeed, the panels are devised as a community-led venture rather than an entity of the police authority.

In some of the other panels, for example, at Slough, the impression is given of a more pragmatic approach to recruitment of community members. Here the panel is smaller, but a diverse set of perspectives are brought to the table – the membership currently including a local business leader, a local vicar, a member of the local Chamber of Commerce, a representative from a local voluntary community organisation, two head-teachers, representatives from the Slough Race Equality Council, the local university, a police authority member, a member of the local Youth Offending Team and a member of the local Primary Care Trust.

It is still early days in the life of these pilots and there is some way to go before their impact on police accountability can be properly assessed. However, several pointers are already apparent, for example the importance of selecting an effective Chair, ideally an independent member from the community to underline neutrality; and the importance of allowing plenty of time for relationships within the panels to develop and for the groups to come to understand their role and gain confidence in undertaking it. The question of training needs also to be addressed, although a particularly positive dynamic in several of the pilots has been the 'freshness' of the perspectives and contributions of some of the community representatives – untainted by the effects of long involvement in committee processes and protocols of public service organisations. And this is a point emphasised by Wagenaar in his analysis of similar

*Continued on page 40*

initiatives in some local communities in Rotterdam, Netherlands (Wagenaar, 2005).

As already intimated, the landscape for police accountability is shifting. The move to fewer and larger strategic forces means that police authorities will inevitably become more strategic in their functioning too. And the recently published review of the *Crime and Disorder Act* proposes new arrangements for the scrutiny of community safety partnerships by local authorities and in so doing, perhaps challenges the place for the type of local accountability panels that have been touched on in this article. It is also pertinent to note that many senior police officers seem wary of such panels, presumably because they seem to threaten in-roads into the traditional operational independence of the police (something that police authorities, on the whole, understand and generally respect).

That said, a significant question mark continues to hang over the public accountability of the police, and the Government's proposals for involving local authorities in a new scrutiny process are really more relevant to the broader agenda of community safety than about police accountability per se. It would be a pity indeed if the momentum that has recently been established through the pilots to strengthen public accountability in local policing were lost, and if the associated learning opportunities were overlooked just as they are beginning to yield some useful insights on 'what works' best. While community safety may be a particular preoccupation of Government at the present time, the need for sharper accountability in policing remains a priority to be addressed one way or another, as the map of police areas grows ever more sparse.

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