

Community policing under New Labour

Barry Loveday identifies the necessary steps to successful neighbourhood policing.

After ten years in office, it is appropriate to assess the extent to which Tony Blair's 'New Labour' government has proved able to move the police juggernaut towards a delivery of service that synchronises with public priorities and demand. While the picture remains mixed, there are clear signs that some fundamental re-engineering of the police organisation may now be in sight, which if successfully implemented could have significant benefits for local communities and the way they are policed.

Policing by numbers

Official commitment to re-orientating policing has however come late in the day. This may have reflected the fact that until recently New Labour remained steadfastly committed to the party political 'virility test' of increased police numbers, as was its predecessor Conservative government. Substantial increases in police spending undertaken along with the Crime Fighting Fund (CFF), which until 2006 ring-fenced spending on police officers, has led to the creation of an historically high police establishment of around 140,000 officers. While not seeking to belittle this achievement, it is fair to say that this establishment has been directed by way of 'driving up police performance' to achieving an ever-increasing number of centrally set performance targets. Many of these targets have unfortunately proved to have only a marginal relevance to many local communities as successive surveys have clearly demonstrated (Police Superintendents Association 2003). An avalanche of public service agreements and related targets may ironically have had the effect of further removing the police from the community. Perhaps even more remarkably, this was allowed to occur despite the then ground-breaking *Crime and Disorder Act of 1998*, which for the first time provided a framework and platform for partnership delivery of community safety strategy and community policing at local authority level. This failure was in no small way due to the 'nationalisation' of community safety by way of yet more centrally set public service agreements which effectively undermined its original purpose.

In the year 2002

For these reasons, among others, there was to be no significant development in terms of reform until 2002 which within the *Police Reform Act* of that year saw the arrival of the proposed 'Police Community Support Officers' (PCSOs). In the face of what proved to be (in some police quarters) bitter resistance,

David Blunkett as Home Secretary committed the government to a major expansion of this role.

Described by the Police Federation as little more than 'plastic policemen' or 'policing on the cheap', the PCSO experience has in fact proved to be overwhelmingly successful. Evidence from perhaps the best source – that of operational police managers – tells us that, contrary to expectation, in some areas PCSOs have had an immediate and dramatic impact.

Early assessments of the impact of PCSOs in London referred to dramatic falls in street crime as a result of visible and regular patrol work along with significant increases in public reassurance (Francis, 2003). Interestingly PCSO recruitment has also posed a challenge to the police hierarchy. In terms of both gender and ethnic background, many more women and members of ethnic minority groups appear much more prepared to join up as PCSOs than they do as police officers. Precisely why this should be is a matter that might repay further study by senior police management. It is the case however that dedicated patrol activity by officers unencumbered by demands of career progression has proved (as with street wardens) to be highly positive in generating local intelligence from the community. It has also served to highlight that, quite contrary to often long-held professional judgement, police patrol continues to play a vital role in the delivery of effective policing.

Citizen focus

Most recently the need for a major reorientation of policing has been reflected by way of citizen-focused policing, which is in turn intimately linked to the roll-out of neighbourhood policing across England and Wales. As Paul Evans, head of the Home Office Police Standards Directorate comments, citizen-focused policing means reflecting the needs and expectations of individuals and local communities in police decision making, service delivery and practice (Home Office 2006:3). In what could prove to be a new direction for local 'community' policing, the citizen-focused approach is designed to improve both public confidence and the satisfaction of users of the service, while also increasing public involvement in policing. Some indication of the nature of change contemplated within this initiative is reflected in the demand for cultural change within the organisation that puts, within the citizen focus strategy, public satisfaction at the centre of all police activity (Home Office 2006:10).

Citizen focus is therefore very closely linked to the implementation of neighbourhood policing. Currently a primary aim within the Home Office is to ensure that by 2008 every police area in the country will have a dedicated neighbourhood policing team, and that by April 2007, every community will see increased patrolling, better local information and a focus on 'confidence and reassurance' (Home Office 2006). Some indication of police commitment to this programme has been demonstrated within the Metropolitan Police Service. Here the MPS has invested 10% of its operational staff, around 3,500 police and PCSOs, in its Safer Neighbourhoods Programme, within which six staff are allocated to each of London's 630 local authority wards. Each team consists of three police officers and three PCSOs. Described as representing a 'new paradigm' of community policing by Met. Police Commissioner Ian Blair, these ward-based police teams are specifically not required to pursue centrally set targets but to concentrate instead on responding to resident demand.

It is apparent that few police forces outside of London could begin to conceive, pro-rata, of such a manpower investment. Indeed even within the MPS the cost of this programme has only been met by a decision of the London Mayor Ken Livingstone to substantially increase the police precept to help pay for it. Outside of London there may not be an equal appetite to raise precepts. Indeed recent experience suggests there is a marked disinclination among local electorates to accept increases in council tax, particularly where in the past this has not been reflected in any increase in visible policing (or any policing). Yet this problem has been made more acute with the government's recent decision not to provide funding for the 24,000 PCSOs identified earlier for England and Wales. Therefore, if neighbourhood policing remains a primary objective, local authority funding may yet be needed.

Sustaining 'community' neighbourhood policing

If the policing programme first enunciated within *Building Communities: Beating Crime* (Home Office, 2004) is to be sustained, it is clear that neighbourhood policing delivery will need to be firmly anchored within a local authority framework. This is because experience demonstrates that local policing strategies can be all too easily overtaken by events, by pressure of police officer abstractions and also by the search for yet further initiatives for career purposes among senior police officers. The road to neighbourhood policing passes through a graveyard of earlier and now abandoned police initiatives whose shelf life rarely extended beyond a couple of years (*viz.* policing by objectives; total geographic policing; problem oriented policing, community oriented policing *etc.*).

Therefore, if the new paradigm of neighbourhood policing is to be pursued, it should be made a joint responsibility of the police and local government. The latter may need to buy into the strategy, but this would in turn generate a right to determine where and how local police and PCSOs would deliver that strategy. For neighbourhood policing to work over the long term, local authorities should become integral partners in determining its delivery. The attraction of this, as has been recently argued by Nick Herbert, Shadow Minister for Police Reform, is that giving citizens a stake in the provision of their local policing could be a powerful step towards the empowerment of communities to ensure the safety of their areas.

A first step would come though local authority funding and the power to determine the neighbourhood policing strategy within its boundaries.

Conclusion

Community policing to which the government is now committed does not come cheap and cannot be sustained in the absence of substantial local government investment. It is also the case that few police forces will ever be able to embark upon this route without the implementation of workforce modernisation predicated on fewer police officers and the employment of many more police staff working within recently piloted 'mixed economy' police teams.

There is however one other alternative. This is currently being explored by Ray Mallon, Mayor of Middlesbrough, who has exercised clear civic leadership through his 'Raising Hope Initiative'. This is based on a partnership between the local authority and the police and the employment of over 80 street wardens who can expect to deal with around 400 incidents a month. These have now become, as the Mayor has recently argued, an 'integral part' of the law enforcement and crime detection and reduction network within the area.

Community policing in Blair's Britain, ten years on, presents a rather mixed picture. Yet it is clear that pressure towards closer local community delivery of police service is now a central aspiration within government and one that is moreover shared by the two main political parties. What precise police /local authority framework is established to direct and sustain community neighbourhood policing remains a matter of debate. Yet this framework and its efficacy could ultimately determine the success or failure of this important policing initiative.

Barry Loveday is Reader in Criminal Justice, Portsmouth University.

References

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