



TURNING THE KEY?

**Can leaders unlock the transformational power of
volunteers – 21st Century Community Engagement**

ABSTRACT

At a time of increasing pressure on public services there may never be a better time for leaders to refresh their thinking on how they harness the considerable resources that remain largely untapped in every community. Can leaders turn the key and unlock this resource?

By Richard James, Dr Iain Britton & Jayne Pascoe

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Turning the key? Can leaders unlock the transformational power of volunteers – 21st Century Community Engagement

At a time of increasing pressure on public services there may never be a better time for leaders to refresh their thinking on how they harness the considerable resources that remain largely untapped in every community. In the second of a series of articles Intensive Engagement's Richard James (a former police territorial commander) Dr Ian Britton (a leading authority on Citizens in Policing- CiP) and Jayne Pascoe (Head of Partnerships and Projects for Neighbourhood Watch Network) suggest there is no shortage of support available. Can leaders turn the key and unlock this resource?

Volunteering has the potential to transform not only what policing can achieve, but more fundamentally to change what policing is. Resetting relationships with communities, empowering local people, massively upscaling resource and capability. This potential is already seen in part, through the tens of thousands who volunteer as 'Citizens in Policing' as Special Constables, as Police Support Volunteers, and as Cadets and Youth Volunteers, as well as in the massive wider volunteer effort in myriad forms which helps keep our communities safe. This is only the start of what volunteers *could* deliver if we were able to think differently and see the potential.

What might a 21st Century vision of volunteering programmes at the heart of a new paradigm, a whole new philosophy, of 'community engagement' look like?

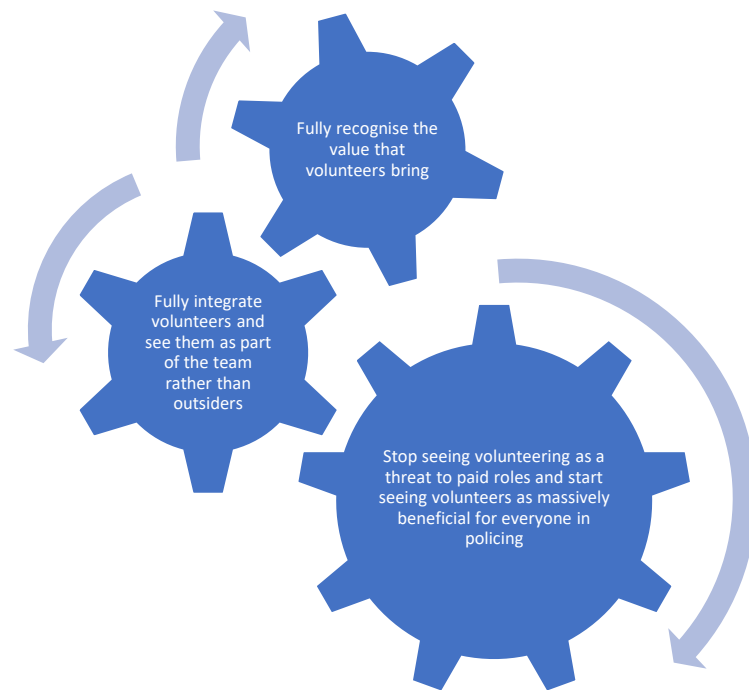
Volunteering at the heart of community engagement – In practice, policing organisations often perceive (and therefore structure, manage and resource) their neighbourhood policing and community engagement activity separately from their volunteer programmes, rather than seeing volunteering as being a core element of effective community engagement and empowerment. Volunteers reach, connect, and impact their communities in a way that others often can't. Managed well, volunteer programmes can be at the heart of engaging, purposive, proactive, partnered, representative, connected policing. Volunteers aren't a warm and cuddly nice to have thing. Volunteers yearn for strategic leaders in policing who do more than smile at them and say well done, before quickly returning their attention to the more important stuff with their 'real' staff. Thought about differently, volunteers can be at the heart of police organisational development and police reform, they can deliver some genuine transformation in capacity and capability, they can bring time and expertise and experience and knowledge, passion, awareness, difference, lived experience, authenticity. There is no effective 'community engagement' model that doesn't engage. And there are few more tangible benchmarks of *genuine* (not tokenistic, but empowering) engagement than vibrant, direct participatory and volunteer programmes. Yet, in reality, volunteering often isn't even mentioned in policing strategic reviews and plans and reform initiatives, or if it is, at best it is an afterthought bolted on.

Seeing the potential - Just imagine if we could nurture and benefit from the youth-led social action of many thousands of young people volunteering within policing in 500+ communities across all corners of the country. Imagine if we had literally tens of thousands of local volunteers who were up for getting visibly out there at the roadside in their communities to help make our roads safer. If we had watch associations that engaged hundreds of thousands of local people in practical, everyday ways making their localities safer. If we had hundreds of volunteer projects that helped the vulnerable and kept people safe on our streets. Just imagine if every day those with hugely specialist tech skills and fraud skills were offering to help for free? What if we also had hundreds of local volunteer projects to support victims and to help prevent crime? Imagine if on top of all that, there was a vibrant broader scene of thousands of local community and volunteer initiatives to work with across all our communities. Just imagine, finally, if we had tens of thousands of people who already give of their time for free to join their local police, some in uniform on the front-line... and many more who maybe would in the future? Imagine that!?! We of course don't need to imagine any of this... it's already there, the challenge is that we need to learn to see it.

Recognising the bigger picture – Part of the challenge is recognising the bigger picture beyond those volunteering roles directly under the 'command and control' of policing. Recognising the huge benefit to communities, and to policing, of actively supporting and empowering community-based volunteers, rather than trying to micro-manage them and direct their activity. The police can have a valuable role in helping to better understand and celebrate the impact that community-based volunteers have on creating more resilient communities and reducing crime, whatever they are doing and whichever organisation they are volunteering with. This in turn supports voluntary organisations and groups to better access funding by being able to articulate their impact and their value.

Joining it all up – The current picture of volunteering across public safety is fractured and disjointed. The national 'Citizens in Policing' programme has created some integration, particularly seeking to pull together the three strands of Special Constabularies, Police Support Volunteers, and Volunteer Police Cadets. However, on the ground these elements still function mostly as separate programmes, and even when the supporting staff come together into a single CiP team with shared management there is often still very little cross-activity and joint delivery practically bringing together the different strands of CiP in many forces. There is then typically further disjoint between the core 'internal' CiP categories of volunteer and the wider volunteering landscape of Watch schemes, Community Speedwatch, victim support volunteers, IAGs, Independent Custody Visitors, Crimestoppers, Guardian and street pastor schemes, and the many tens of thousands of other volunteers across public safety and harm reduction. Some pioneering local initiatives, such as the Lancashire Volunteer Partnership, have brought together volunteers across different organisations and sectors, but in most geographies the volunteering world still sits in silos and a volunteer who wants to step sideways from one volunteering context to another often has to navigate the whole onboarding bureaucracy again from scratch.

Changing the culture - Policing needs to shake off the cultural hang ups and strategic blind-spots. Volunteers wish that they were less peripheral, they wish that they were seen more as the key asset that they are. They wish they weren't sometimes seen as a burden. They wish that they were not so constrained in what they are allowed to do because they're seen as a threat or a risk to other people's status, roles, and jobs, and they wish that they didn't always come second in importance to what the unions say. They wish that they were integrated. They wish that they belonged. Some police forces have come a long way to making some of these wishes come true, but its patchy and there is a very long way to go. People who are valued deliver value.



Reset relationships - The community engagement paradigm needs to change. Stop thinking about it as 'us' needing to engage 'them'. You can't engage at people, or for people, you can only ever engage *with* them. Engagement is an activity that can only be done together, defined, shaped, led and delivered together. This is about empowerment. It is also about professional reflexivity and growth - why do we have all these walls that are put up between organisations such as the police and the communities and people that they serve?

This involves different, and more inclusive, thinking. For example, seeing the benefit that community-based volunteer organisations, such as Neighbourhood Watch, can bring by not having the same constraints and perceived risks that police managed volunteers do. That they are simply neighbours helping neighbours and as such, with a little more support from the police and other partners, can be a locally trusted resource that can identify, reach, and support, or signpost support to, those who are most vulnerable within their local network. Ensuring crime prevention advice reaches those that may need it most in a way that best suits their needs. Seeing Neighbourhood Watch Coordinators as bringing the community together to tackle issues that affect them locally, supported, but not led by, the police - so providing a much-needed extension of community and policing capacity.

It is about thinking hard about our professional self-images and our prototypical work identities and our 'in-groups' and about what we tell ourselves about who we are. And specifically thinking hard about why volunteers often don't currently fit and aren't currently valued in any of that. It is not just about confecting 'confidence' and 'trust' of communities in policing in order to hit a target. It is about the police having confidence and trust in communities, and genuinely seeing the police as part of the community rather than existing for it. Seeing this as being about 'us', seeing volunteers and communities as being 'us'.

Policing needs to genuinely listen, respect, and engage. Sometimes local policing teams already do this very well. Too often though it feels more like a tick box exercise. Genuinely listening to, valuing and utilising the support and opinions of those members of the community engaged through, for example, Custody Visitors and Independent Advisory Groups and Volunteer Police Cadets, respecting the different perspectives on policing and the challenge that they can bring to the status quo.

Volunteers are sometimes valued by police just for how they can support the work of the police - not for what they bring to their community that supports policing outcomes - which is not as obvious, but just as valuable. If this is understood, the police role in supporting the development of community based volunteers becomes clearer - in whatever capacity they are supporting their community to build resilience and remain safe.

Embracing diversity and reaching everyone – Volunteering needs to embrace and celebrate diversity and to reach all communities. Initiatives such as the Volunteer Police Cadets, which engages young people, male and female equally, inclusively and reaching into communities many other dimensions of the police family do not, point the way to what future diverse and engaging models could achieve. Too often in the past volunteering initiatives, such as Neighbourhood Watch, Community Speedwatch, and Police Support Volunteers have tended to thrive in communities which are better off and less diverse, and less vulnerable and at risk of crime and anti-social behaviour. The volunteering programmes of the future need to engage, and to be genuinely rooted in, all communities.

Doing volunteering in a professional and effective 21st Century way. It shouldn't come as a particular surprise, but most people who want to volunteer don't want to wait a year whilst the force sorts out the paperwork. They don't want to volunteer their tech expertise to then find it going no waste, lost in a fog of bureaucratic blockages. A 21st Century model would be slick, professional, communicative, above all it would be *welcoming*. It would be online. It would be well led, it would all join up, it would all work together. Volunteers would be supported and developed. Volunteers would be empowered and engaged. It would be innovative and creative. It would be evaluated and evidence-based. The volunteer experience would matter, and it would be good. Volunteer wellbeing would matter and would be supported and nurtured. Volunteers would be appreciated and recognised. Volunteers would have a voice and be listened to. Volunteer programmes would break down agency silos and bounded thinking and wrap around places and solutions and people.



Thinking differently? - A 21st Century model of community engagement should be ambitious and could massively grow volunteer action. Volunteers allow us all to think outside the box of what is possible. The world is changing so much, and some of what we currently have in policing in terms of organisations and staffing and skills and reach into communities simply isn't going to meet the challenges anymore. Only brave leaders will see what volunteers *could* contribute. It's obviously safer not to, and most will just keep being smiley rather than being strategic. The future will rely on those who dare to be different and ambitious.

Leaders need to consider how the volunteering offer should be integrated into a coherent and focused community engagement strategy. A strategy that realises the considerable skills, energies and imagination in order to propel ambitious plans forward, to develop solutions to long term problems and inspire this generation and the next.

If you are interested in finding out more or getting involved, please do get in touch with the authors

About the Authors

Richard James, Managing Director of Intensive Engagement, spent 30 years working in policing; he is a highly experienced police leader, having led significant force-wide change programmes and commanded events of national significance. Richard provides advice and support to police forces, local authorities and third sector organisations who are seeking to develop and implement effective engagement strategies that harness community assets, surface valuable insights and increase participation. He recently spent time working with eight EU policing agencies examining effective community policing practices and exploring the benefits that technology can offer. Richard continues to work alongside academic institutions to research, test and implement evidence-based practice.

richard@intensiveengagement.com

Dr Iain Britton is an academic who studies volunteering across policing and public safety. Iain has undertaken research extensively with most police forces across England and Wales, with Police Scotland, and also internationally. He has particular focus on enhancing the impact and value of volunteer programmes, strategic leadership, improving volunteer experience, improving diversity and reach of volunteer programmes, and driving innovation, sustainability, integration, and cultural change. He is Visiting Research Fellow at the Institute for Public Safety, Crime and Justice, University of Northampton, and Visiting Associate Professor, University of Central Florida. Current projects include an international research partnership looking at volunteer experience in policing in different national settings, an international project exploring volunteer leadership in policing, and a national project in the UK focused on female Special Constables. Iain also works nationally in an advisory capacity for the Association of Special Constabulary Officers (ASCO). For the past five years Iain has been a member of the judging panel for the national Ferrers Awards, which recognise volunteer contribution across policing.

Jayne Pascoe is the Head of Partnerships and Projects for Neighbourhood Watch Network with responsibility for working with partners from public, private and voluntary and community sectors to develop and help deliver key priorities in line with the Neighbourhood Watch 2020-2025 Strategic Plan. Jayne retired after 30 years as a police officer at the end of 2015 following a secondment to the Police Strategy and Reform Unit at the Home Office as senior policy advisor on police transparency, accessibility and accountability. Between 2007 and 2013 she was seconded to the National Policing Improvement Agency and then the College of Policing, leading national work programmes such as Citizen Focused Policing, Public Confidence and the Citizens in Policing Programme; supporting the initial roll out of Neighbourhood Policing and identifying future developments for local policing.”