



THE GAP BETWEEN EXPECTATIONS AND REALITY IN NEIGHBOURHOOD POLICING SKILLS

21st Century Community Engagement

ABSTRACT

This research explores the skill set required to sustain long-term community engagement and involvement of the public in public safety. Previous research has indicated that a long-term stable and skilled implementation team is essential to successful neighbourhood policing (Curtis, 2022) and the skillset of those involved needs to be systematic and widespread. The research involved a survey of 150 police officers' confidence regarding such skills, triangulated with them showing how they might deliver these skills in a real-world 'street-level strategising' exercise.

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SECTION. 1. ABSTRACT

Neighbourhood policing is the heart and soul of the British system of policing. In 2012, the (then) Association of Chief Police Officers (ACPO) identified Neighbourhood Policing and the Peelian Principles as ‘the heart and soul of the British model (ACPO, 2012), while HMIC described it as ‘the cornerstone of British Policing’ (HMIC, 2014, p.36). In the most recent review of the state of British policing services, HMFRC reiterated the up-stream effects of neighbourhood work, “there are some problems that the police simply can’t investigate their way out of. Work to prevent crime from happening in the first place shouldn’t ever be neglected by the police” (HMFRC, 2021, p23). The challenges to community relations in policing was again highlighted by the Casey Review which noted that the Metropolitan Police was “far too geared to a ‘command and control culture’, which pushes messages and orders down, and does not want to hear feedback, challenge or even suggestions for improvement... [in which] some action was being taken, but failed to deliver enduring change...[leading to] little evidence of sustained or coherent implementation or follow-up (Casey, 2023, p96-99)

His Majesty’s Inspectorate regularly investigates the skills and effectiveness of policing and each year, a different police force is criticised for failures in this regard (HMFRC, 2021b). Even forces that are praised for outstanding community engagement (HMFRC, 2022), the report contains anecdotes of online survey tools, bolstered by direct home visits, ward profiles of its communities and monthly priorities but not a systematic and structured plan across all aspects of community policing. The effort required to sustain these tactics often lead to forces losing direction and pace, especially when key individuals move to a different role.

This research explores the skill set required to sustain long-term community engagement and involvement of the public in public safety. Previous research has indicated that a long-term stable and skilled implementation team is essential to successful neighbourhood policing (Curtis, 2022) and the skillset of those involved needs to be systematic and widespread. The research involved a survey of 150 police officers’ confidence regarding such skills, triangulated with them showing how they might deliver these skills in a real-world ‘street-level strategising’ exercise.

The research indicates that police officers have strong and consistent confidence in their understanding of why they were in that role, and that they would be listened to by their (immediate) superiors. They were less confident about listening to all sections of the community and seeking the capabilities and experiences of those communities, preferring to see community residents as less capable and resourceful than they might be. They also struggled to think through the long-term consequences of community initiatives. Their confidence was not wholly borne out by their workshop practice. Police forces in the UK may be overconfident in their abilities in community engagement and overestimate the long-term viability and success of their engagement activities.

SECTION. 2. COMMUNITY ENGAGEMENT

Despite the prominence of the Peelian principles, anxieties about meaningful and purposeful community engagement have a long history in the research literature. Formal meetings have already been shown to be ineffective in terms of representation, independence, and impact (Myhill and Rudat, 2006). The National Reassurance Policing Programme findings showed engagement activities failed to influence public perceptions of the police. In four out of ten sites, the public questioned the effort the police put into finding out what people think; in five sites the public thought they were

ineffective at working with the local community; and in eight sites that the police were perceived as unwilling to respond to the public’s views (Morris, 2006). The evaluation concluded that the method of canvassing residents’ views needed to be more robust, and officers needed to improve their consultative and communication skills.

The Police Foundation found that informal rather than formal contacts work best and recommended that police officers should prioritise the identification and engagement of individuals and groups who do not get consulted and whose needs might be ignored (Lloyd and Foster 2009). Younger people, for example, have expressed an interest in contacting the police online, which clearly constitutes one way of connecting with members of the community who might otherwise be disinterested or antagonistic (Knibbs, 2013).

SECTION. 3. METHOD

Whilst providing an awareness course for over 150 police officers and PCSOs in a large UK police force, we applied a survey about their abilities and confidence to apply modern neighbourhood policing techniques and strategies. In this survey, they indicated that they strongly or very strongly agreed with key principles of modern neighbourhood policing, suggesting a strong confidence in their abilities.

3.1. QUANTITATIVE SURVEY OF NEIGHBOURHOOD POLICE OFFICERS

A short survey was devised to apply to over 150 police officers, all with specific neighbourhood policing duties.

	6	5	4	3	2	1	0
	Strongly Agree	Agree	Slightly agree	No opinion	Slightly disagree	Disagree	Strongly disagree
1. If I have a new idea about a way of tackling crime and ASB I will be listened to by my superiors							
2. I understand why I should focus my attention on certain parts of the neighbourhood							
3. I seek out the opinions and concerns of all sections of the community							
4. I seek out and the views and experience of all types of people in the neighbourhood I work on, especially the least vocal or those whose first language is not English							
5. I seek out and work with people who are highly connected and highly capable in the community							
6. I know who most of the vulnerable people on my neighbourhood are and from whom they are most at risk							
7. I work with key stakeholders on the state to create a written plan of action that we have created together to tackle the causes of crime							
8. I think carefully about ongoing behaviour changes that are created by local projects, initiatives or operations we run on our neighbourhoods							
9. If I get stuck in solving a local problem I am confident I can take my action plan to a senior manager to get help and connections to the right people and solutions outside my own organisation							
10. I know what success looks like for my organisation in my neighbourhoods							
11. I know what success looks like for residents in my neighbourhood and my work helps them achieve that							

Figure 1 Survey questions for neighbourhood police officers

Each question relates to an aspect of successful and purposive neighbourhood policing, developed from a self-evaluation exercise undertaken in previous research (Curtis, 2021, Curtis 2023) . Each question was related to a six-point Likert scale, from Strongly Disagree with the statement, through a ‘no opinion’ response to Strong Agreement with the statement.

3.2. TRIANGULATION WITH QUALITATIVE DATA

In order to triangulate the initial survey data, we then provided the same officers a 1 hour briefing and activities to consider the purpose of neighbourhood policing, Peelian principles with respect to police effectiveness and legitimacy, definitions and guidance on neighbourhood policing and local strategies. We then set a 30–40-minute task to respond to an emerging neighbourhood policing problem (*Figure 2*), asking them to work in small teams to establish a neighbourhood strategy.



Workshop Scenario

- In your neighbourhood, you are beginning to hear reports of the exploitation of some people with learning disabilities
- You are also hearing reports of a number of altercations in the streets, including homophobic attacks. Burglary rates are starting to increase. There has been a sharp increase in shops closing and houses for sale.
- In your teams: map out the key steps of your engagement plan to respond.
 - What are you going to do
 - Who are you going to do it with?
- 10 mins to report back



Figure 2 The neighbourhood policing scenario

They were specifically tasked to avoid creating more work for themselves, use their understanding of the current force, regional and national neighbourhood policing guidance, and to apply the knowledge they have about their own neighbourhoods to the case study problem. In this way we were testing their ability to engage in ‘street level strategising’. In theory, and based on their confidence in the survey, the officers should have been reasonably aware of specific community institutions, local norms & behaviours as well as key criminal and community safety individuals to rapidly establish short, medium, and long-term strategies to address the case study problem. Officers were prompted to note what they would have achieved by the end of their first working week, in three weeks and then in three months. We collected the notes from the officers after each session and analysed them to identify their approach to strategizing.

SECTION. 4. RESULTS

Overall, the pattern of responses was that officers are strongly confident in their skills in most aspects of neighbourhood policing. The only question that scored less than 50% Agree was statement 5: “I work with key stakeholders on the state to create a written plan of action that we have created together to tackle the causes of crime” statement. On the other hand, the first two statements (1. ‘If I have a new idea about a way of tackling crime and ASB I will be listened to by my superiors’ and ‘2. I understand why I should focus my attention on certain parts of the neighbourhood’) were very strongly agreed with, with only 9 and 5 officers being unsure or disagreeing with the statements.

THE EXTENT TO WHICH OFFICERS AGREED OR DISAGREED WITH THE NEIGHBOURHOOD POLICING STATEMENTS

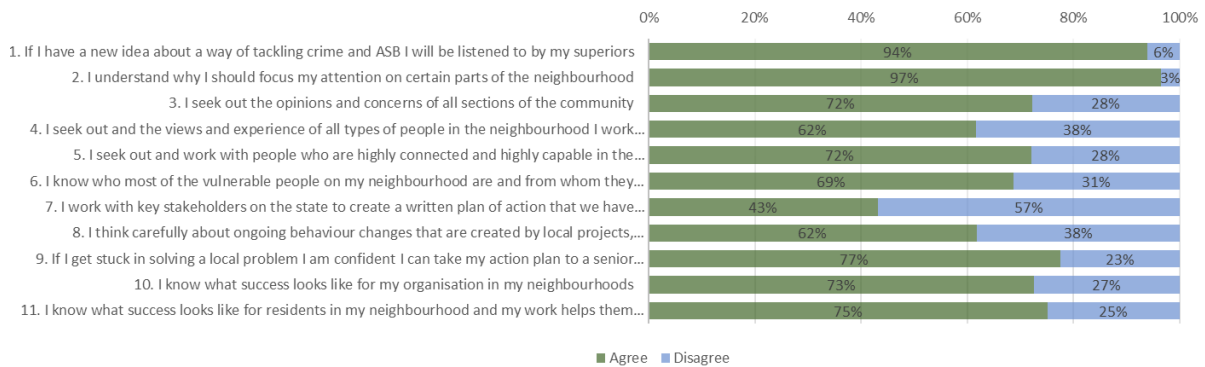


Figure 3 Simplified results of survey.

Working through each statement in turn, **Statement 1 ‘If I have a new idea about a way of tackling crime and ASB I will be listened to by my superiors’** is designed to establish whether the officers are able to escalate problems and solutions through to the senior ranks of the forces they work for. It measures the receptivity of the force to innovative ideas. In speaking to the officers after the survey, we also got a strong impression that they understood ‘superiors’ to mean no higher than the sergeant, whereas they were more ambivalent at being heard above rank of inspector.

Statement 2 ‘I understand why I should focus my attention on certain parts of the neighbourhood’ was even more strongly approved of by the officers (97% agree). The question establishes the extent to which officers at the street level are clear about the tactical approaches being deployed in their operations. The question doesn’t explain whether these tactics are effective, efficient or legitimate, but it seems that officers are very confident in their understanding of the purpose of focusing on one part of a neighbourhood, perhaps due to threat/harm assessments or bulk crime reporting, rather than policing every district equally.

From this point, the officers became significantly less consistent in their responses, dropping from over 90% agreeing or strongly agreeing, to the mid seventy percent range. Indeed, in the detailed breakdown, over 22% of the officers strongly agreed with the first statement, but only 11% strongly agreed with statement three.

Statement 3 “I seek out the opinions and concerns of all sections of the community” still scored very strongly, with 72% agreeing with the statement, but it is clear that the officers were much less consistent with each other in responding. Fifteen percent of the respondents disagreed or strongly disagreed that this what they do, compared to only 4% responding in this way in both of the first statements. Thirteen percent of the respondents had no opinion on this statement.

Statement 4 “I seek out and the views and experience of all types of people in the neighbourhood I work on, especially the least vocal or those whose first language is not English” probes the confidence of the officers in the depth of their community engagement further. In theory, the officers should respond in more or less the same way, although 35% of officers had no opinion or did not think that they were doing a good job with harder-to-reach or harder-to-hear segments of the communities they work in. They may also have noted the shift in language from Statement 3 ‘opinions and concerns’ to ‘views and experience’ in Statement 4. The strength of agreement with the first language of Statement 3 reflects a concern with collecting a ‘deficit’ world view of the neighbourhood- of surveying for ‘problems’ and running surgeries to find out what issues and

complaints the neighbourhood have, rather than having a rounded ‘problems, opportunities, strengths and solutions’ approach.

Statement 5 “I seek out and work with people who are highly connected and highly capable in the community” is designed to establish how targeted and purposive community engagement connections are. The literature on neighbourhood policing (Myhill, 2012) is critical of unfocused engagement with uninformed and unrepresentative ‘usual suspects’, so ensuring that all connections with the community are with people who are deeply connected to those people they represent (and not considered representative merely dues to their membership of a particular community). Sixty eight percent of officers think that they are good at this. Nevertheless, the responses are much less consistent, with a spread of responses across the Likert scale, as shown in *Figure 4*.

	6. Strongly Agree	5. Agree	4. Slightly Agree	3. No opinion	2. Slightly disagree	1. Disagree	0. Strongly disagree
I seek out and work with people who are highly connected and highly capable in the community	11%	37%	24%	15%	9%	4%	1%

Figure 4 Spread of responses to Statement 5

Statement 6 “I know who most of the vulnerable people on my neighbourhood are and from whom they are most at risk” relates directly to the function of a neighbourhood officer as a source of risk/harm intelligence. Embedded and proactive officers would be expected to have reviewed all parts of a neighbourhood to have a strategic view of the vulnerable communities present in their neighbourhoods. This doesn’t mean that they know everyone by name, but that they could readily focus on a specific vulnerability issue and move rapidly to connect with highly connected and highly capable people to help. In theory, this statement should be closely related to the previous two statements (4 and 5) in that the views and experiences of the most vulnerable should be accessed through knowing who is vulnerable, through those who are best connected within a community. This is borne out in the data, that 62% of officers believe that they know who is vulnerable, and from whom (Statements 4 and 5 scored 60% and 68% respectively).

Statement 7 “I work with key stakeholders on the estate to create a written plan of action that we have created together to tackle the causes of crime” is designed to establish how much police work with stakeholders to develop clearly written and agreed plans to tackle the causes of the demand for service, rather than just resourcing the demand through more patrols. Only 43% of officers agreed with this statement.

Only 62% of officers agreed with **Statement 8** that they “**think carefully about ongoing behaviour changes that are created by local projects, initiatives or operations**”. *Figure 5* shows the detail comparing these two statements, with only 9 officers strongly confident that they think carefully about the implications of their interventions, and only 4 committing to written plans. The diversity of responses also suggests that this cohort of officers were significantly less coherent and consistent with each other in this respect.

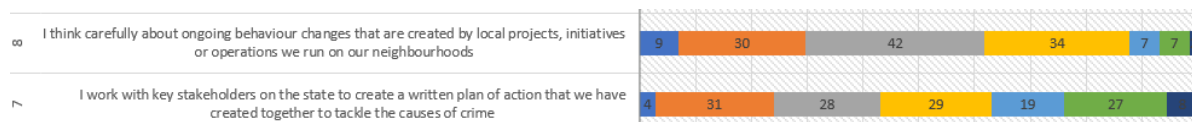


Figure 5 Comparing Statement 7 with 8

Statement 9 “If I get stuck in solving a local problem I am confident I can take my action plan to a senior manager to get help and connections to the right people and solutions outside my own organisation” returns to verify the terms of Statement 1, the ability of the officers, having worked

with the right people in the neighbourhood, to develop the right set of interventions that tackle the causes, rather than symptoms, of crime, secure the written agreement of key stakeholders and ensure its implementation. At this point, the officers are much less confident and consistent in their response than they were in Statement 1, but with 77% of respondents agreeing to this statement, there still seems to be a high level of confidence that officers will get the support they need for this sort of plan, should they successfully reach this point. Only 32% of officers were moderately confident (agree), compared to 60% agreeing with Statement 1. Thirteen percent are strongly confident in this respect.

The final two statements are aimed at establishing the evaluation stage of implementing interventions in neighbourhood policing; focusing on internal factors of success (**Statement 10 ‘I know what success looks like for my organisation in my neighbourhoods’**) and external community focused evaluation (**Statement 11 ‘I know what success looks like for residents in my neighbourhood and my work helps them achieve that’**). Here strong agreement with these statements drops from 13% (for getting things done) to 4% and 3% for Statements 10 and 11 respectively. The range of agreement suggests that the respondents are not strongly consistent in their thinking in this respect, especially when it comes to helping residents achieve the success they desire. Without explanation of what underpins ‘what success looks like’ for the community. This is a very complex process, unless the officers are assuming that merely reducing crime is a robust and widely shared outcome. The confidence with which they have responded suggests that the officers consider these two steps of identifying and securing agreement on evaluation outcome and linking their interventions to the outcomes.

The whole data set indicates a high level of confidence on the part of neighbourhood officers with respect to these key features of modern neighbourhood policing. On the whole, there is modest agreement between the officers, over 60% of the responses on average are in the Agree and Slightly Agree categories, with quite low levels of officers being more ambivalent.

4.1. VERIFYING THE DATA

The officers were then set a 30–40-minute task to respond to an emerging neighbourhood policing problem (*Figure 2*), asking them to work in small teams to establish a step-by-step neighbourhood strategy. The notes from the officers that were collected after each session and analysed to identify their approach to strategizing. It was identified from their notes that:

- a) They were mostly unable to name real world organisations or individuals with whom they might be partnering or gaining intelligence.
- b) Their initial reaction is to deploy more police resources through visits, cocooning, target hardening, more police patrols and individualised investigations.
- c) Their second strategy is to gather more information, rather than building on or working with their existing knowledge of their neighbourhoods.
- d) Partnership relationships were vague- they were not able to note why they should work with (or even why they need not) certain partners. Only a few groups were able to name specific charities, organisations, or even care homes on their neighbourhoods. These tended to be officers from very vulnerable deprived districts.
- e) The guidance, and their practice, is to inform first- to leaflet drop, to do street briefings, to write victim impact statements, but with no clear sense of the outcomes expected from that plan.
- f) The next step is typically to involve, but this is limited to public sector partners, and occasionally third sector organisations, but without clear location specific knowledge. Functions within local authorities are rarely named, and charities are generically referred to.

- g) Engaging with partners and neighbourhoods is invariably written as a future tense, a thing that may occur in the future, rather than a current ongoing activity. The outcomes of such engagement were rarely noted.
- h) Officers found it difficult to establish a theory of what might account for the problems, based on their knowledge of their own neighbourhoods. They opted to find out more information, but with no sense of focus. Sources of intelligence were not targeted or specific.
- i) The officers took some time to apply any prioritisation of activities or actions. Threat, harm or impact risk measures were not considered, and it took considerable effort on the part of the tutors to prompt them to remember their own in-house acronym to assess risk.
- j) Only one group indicated a strong commitment to ensuring more resources were not being committed, and existing resources outside the force were being identified and accessed.
- k) Despite having values (and reasons for joining up) that strongly align with the principles of modern neighbourhood policing, officers constantly referred to 'not having enough time', or that they were abstracted as fill-in for reactive policing duties.
- l) Engagement with the community is interpreted as interactions with individuals rather than interacting with groups of people, communities of geography, interest, or experience. Community engagement appears most often in the trainees notes without qualification or instructions as to how or for what purpose. It is seen as valuable in its own right, or at least, understood on its own terms.
- m) There are several other terms that are used in the strategising documents that are not qualified or explained, suggesting a need to use the term, but without a nuanced understanding of what that means in active terms: early intervention, 'broken window theory', 'you said we did' as an evaluation tool.

SECTION. 5. CONCLUSIONS

The research took place in the context of a series of whole force briefing sessions about neighbourhood policing, with officers who had been identified as having specific experience or duties in neighbourhood rather than reactive policing. The research indicates that police officers have strong and consistent confidence in their understanding of why they were in that role, and that they would be listened to by their (immediate) superiors. They were less confident about listening to all sections of the community and seeking the capabilities and experiences of those communities, preferring to see community residents as less capable and resourceful than they might be. They were less confident about creating written plans with stakeholders and thinking through the long-term consequences of community initiatives. A small proportion are very confident that their plans will be supported by senior leaders, but very much fewer were strongly confident that they understood what community success looked like.

Their confidence was not wholly borne out by their workshop practice. When given the task to implement these skills in a relatively common urgent policing scenario, even when asked to place that scenario in neighbourhoods they know. Their 'street-level strategising' was much more limited, and connections were not made between the briefings before the survey about the skills required in neighbourhood policing, and the deployment of those skills in a real-life scenario.

The implications of this are that police forces in the UK may be overconfident in their abilities in community engagement and overestimate the long-term viability and success of their engagement activities. This was reflected in the HMIFRS Letter to Cleveland Police on its poor community

engagement in 2021. The importance of neighbourhood policing was specifically noted by HMIFRC in their State of Policing report in 2022, noting that many forces dramatically reduced their neighbourhood capabilities, as well as deploying such capabilities on reactive policing, limiting the ability of such forces to be in control of the upstream causes of crime patterns.

The skills reflected in the survey are based on a decade worth of research into what works and how in neighbourhood policing and community engagement and could be used as a national skills framework for forces wishing to focus their development in this area.

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