



Northern Ireland
Assembly

Committee for Justice

OFFICIAL REPORT (Hansard)

CJINI Report: Policing with the Community:
A Follow-up Review of Inspection
Recommendations

25 October 2012

NORTHERN IRELAND ASSEMBLY

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Members present for all or part of the proceedings:

Mr Paul Givan (Chairperson)
Mr Raymond McCartney (Deputy Chairperson)
Mr Stewart Dickson
Mr Alex Easton
Mr Tom Elliott
Mr William Humphrey
Mr Seán Lynch
Mr Patsy McGlone
Mr Jim Wells

Witnesses:

Mr Brendan McGuigan	Criminal Justice Inspection Northern Ireland
Mr Bill Priestley	Criminal Justice Inspection Northern Ireland

The Chairperson: I invite Bill Priestley, who was the lead inspector on the 'Policing with the Community' inspection, to the meeting. This session will be recorded by Hansard. I will hand over to you again, Mr McGuigan.

Mr Brendan McGuigan (Criminal Justice Inspection Northern Ireland): The inspection was a follow-up review into the findings of our report 'Policing with the Community', which was published in April 2009.

That report made several recommendations and suggestions to support the progress of embedding a community policing ethos throughout the PSNI and improving the visibility and accessibility of police officers. The Patten report in 1999 had placed 'Policing with the Community' squarely at the core of how any future police service should be delivered. This review found that, in the context of a persistent threat, the PSNI, together with community partners, had aligned strategies and policies to deliver the Chief Constable's vision of a personal, protective and professional policing service. The fieldwork for the follow-up review was unique. It was conducted over a period of two years following the publication of the original report. During the fieldwork, evidence was also collected from other inspection activity up to the end of March 2012. That enabled — sorry, I have frog in my throat.

Mr Wells: What were you on last night, Brendan? *[Laughter.]*

The Chairperson: From your experience, Jim, what would it be?

Mr Wells: It must have been some party.

Mr McGuigan: Pardon me.

That enabled the collection of evidence from multiple sources, including community representatives and a wide spectrum of police officers, and some short periods of observation of neighbourhood and response officers whilst on patrol.

The key findings, in respect of community input, were that partnership working had continued despite the risks posed by elements aligned against the current policing arrangements. Further development and refinement of partnerships needed to continue to ensure that they remained relevant and effective in enabling the delivery of the Policing with the Community strategy. The establishment of police and community safety partnerships (PCSPs) goes some way to providing a more cohesive approach to local policing and community safety strategies. However, the approach in Northern Ireland stops short of establishing the same type of obligatory partnerships as those established by the Crime and Disorder Act 1998 in England and Wales.

Structures and resources were better aligned to deliver the PSNI's Policing with the Community 2020 strategy. The provision of 700 dedicated neighbourhood officers had made a positive contribution to improved service delivery. Sustaining those resources into the future remained a significant risk. There appeared to be no corporate service-wide model for resource allocation that aligned with the Policing with the Community 2020 strategy. Inspectors could find no policy that protected the numbers of officers specifically deployed to neighbourhood policing teams. If Policing with the Community is to continue as the core function of the PSNI, a way needs to be found to protect those resources.

Recommendations to provide more flexibility in the composition of the Police Service and the establishment of PCSPs were achieved. The inclusion of accountability mechanisms in the 'Policing with the Community 2020 Strategy' was a positive step. Monitoring and measurement of departmental and team performance was achieved by providing reports to the service delivery excellence board and to heads of Departments. Externally, the Policing Board received reports on a quarterly basis on the implementation of the strategy.

There was no specific reference to Policing with the Community and district commanders' accountability meetings, although progress was monitored by reference to other metrics. By not specifically identifying the strategy as a standing item, an opportunity to reinforce its position as central to all policing activities was missed.

There was much more awareness of the need to achieve the 80% retention target of neighbourhood officers on their core duties. However, there were instances of neighbourhood officers being required to perform duties outside their neighbourhood or to provide cover for court duty and prisoner escort obligations.

At the time of inspection and fieldwork, the individual performance review project had not been implemented. In some but not all districts, officers and supervisors had linked individual performance to the strategy informally with variable success. In one instance, that had led to an inappropriate and crude measure of neighbourhood officers' performance.

The enabling factors, as we saw them, were that new contact management arrangements had only recently been implemented across the whole organisation but had delivered a more centralised contact management system based in four bespoke centres. Contact management staff were aware of the responsibilities with regard to Policing with the Community and how the 2020 strategy linked to their role.

Since the devolution of policing and justice powers to Northern Ireland, there has been more flexibility in setting the composition of the Police Service workforce through a tripartite arrangement of the Chief Constable, the Minister of Justice and the Policing Board. The effects of the new arrangements form part of the inspection into workforce modernisation, which we hope to publish in 2012-13.

The overall conclusion was that substantial progress had been made in delivering policing with the community since the original report of 2009. The revised strategy had begun to impact on the delivery of policing in the community through its overt linkage to the Chief Constable's vision and to the policing commitments. The overall picture had been one of improvement being delivered through the Policing with the Community 2020 strategy, its implementation plans, delivery guides and accountability

mechanisms. The PSNI needs to continue to work hard to ensure full implementation of the strategy by appropriate, sustainable resourcing, inclusive consultation and further development of partnership working and meaningful performance assessment.

Mr Elliott: Thank you for the presentation. Recommendation 2 is on call management. I note that the report states that that has been partly achieved. I get a significant number of queries about the poor call management system and the issue of trying to get to talk to someone who knows the problem or who you may be able to explain it to. I do not know how that has been partly achieved, because the reflection of the community is different. To take it one step further, the feedback from the community police officers back to the public is very poor.

Mr McGuigan: Absolutely. We prepared a report on call management and published it earlier this year. It is not quite what we had envisaged. We probably saw two centres operating. The reality of it was that it was operating in practically every district at one stage, and it was very difficult to get corporate standards applied in all areas. We did not believe that the police were making the best use of technology. You know now that, when you phone your bank, one telephone call will do. That was what we envisaged for the Police Service: the ability to drill into the policing service and be able to talk directly to the officer who you needed to speak to or, indeed, to have a holding response with a callback feature. We believe that the Police Service has gone some distance. It now has four bespoke centres. The abandonment rate, which had been really very high as people got fed up waiting for someone to answer the phone or to get a response, has reduced considerably. There is absolutely no doubt about that. We see improvements, and I will pass to Bill if he wants to reinforce that.

Mr Bill Priestley (Criminal Justice Inspection Northern Ireland): It is fair to say that we had variable responses when we spoke to members of the community on the issue of contact management. The methodology was to go back to people who we had spoken to in the past. The overall conclusion was that they had seen some improvement in how their calls were handled. That is not to say that we did not hear some horror stories about people ringing in, but these were much less frequent than they had been previously. The overall conclusion was that there had been some movement forward. The four centres —

Mr Elliott: It was very, very poor and now it is just poor. Is that it?

Mr Priestley: That would be a bit unfair. Standards have been applied more corporately. People are still experiencing some poor service, but, from the figures that we saw, particularly on the abandonment rate, and from speaking to people who we had spoken to in the past, we had to conclude that there had been an improvement in how the service on contact management was being delivered.

Mr Elliott: That is not the experience that I have.

Recommendation 3 is on community support officers. That process appears to have been abandoned altogether. Has it?

Mr McGuigan: It has been. It was abandoned just before it was about to be launched. The reality was that they just did not have the money to do it. It was a significant disappointment to lots of people in Northern Ireland because they felt that it was an opportunity to involve more people in policing, perhaps through volunteering, a bit like what exists in England and Wales.

Mr Elliott: I note that the recommendation is only about the implementation of policies regarding the recruitment of PCSOs. It states that that recommendation was partly achieved, but the whole thing was abandoned. That is slightly misleading.

Mr Priestley: The recommendation goes on to talk about measurement and management of performance in policing with the community. It included a range of recommendations. The PCSOs were one aspect of the recommendation when it was written into the original report. As I remember, that was part of a range of recommendations under one heading. The parts of the recommendation that were partly achieved were in relation to how performance was assessed in Policing with the Community and the allocation of resources to support and sustain Policing with the Community. We regarded that as being partly achieved with the provision of 700-odd officers working in neighbourhood units.

I take your point, but the way that the recommendations were written was as three separate parts of one overall recommendation that looked to allocate resources to support Policing with the Community. Two parts of that have been achieved, but the PCSOs never got off the ground.

Mr Dickson: Forgive me for leaving the meeting for a few moments. I come back to the issue of the 700 dedicated neighbourhood officers. I appreciate that there will always be operational reasons why they may have other tasks to perform. Nevertheless, what concerns do you have that dedicated neighbourhood officers are actually dedicated neighbourhood officers in that the neighbourhoods really have an opportunity to get to know them? You cannot do that in a placement of a few months.

Mr McGuigan: Absolutely. Probably the one caveat that we have is retaining the numbers of neighbourhood officers. It was quite clear to us from this fieldwork that communities had seen a difference. They were starting to get to know identified officers who were staying there for a period of time. All of that is very positive. We know that nothing ever stays the same. We were looking to see whether there is a strategy to protect the neighbourhood officers to ensure that Policing with the Community is embedded. That is the visible part of it. Of course, the police will say that Policing with the Community goes much wider than just neighbourhood policing. However, for us, that is the most visible part of it. That is the part that people and communities want to see. They want to see the neighbourhood officer on the beat, on his bicycle, doing whatever. Those officers need to be visible and seen dealing with the issues that the public wants them to deal with.

Mr Dickson: It is not just about visibility. It is the fact that it is the same individuals.

Mr McGuigan: Absolutely. We inspect the police regularly on a number of issues. We know that there is very little movement within policing now. The majority of the churn is over. You would hope for a period of stability and that those 700 officers get to develop the relationships to bring Policing with the Community to its full fruition.

Mr Dickson: That is very welcome.

Mr Lynch: Thanks for coming and for the presentation. I want to go back to the call handlers, which a member mentioned earlier. I had the same experience when I was on the old district policing partnerships (DPPs) in my constituency. I understand that, elsewhere, those jobs are mostly civilian but that quite a few retired and rehired policemen have gone into those jobs. Is it not the case that they are not necessarily the best people to retrain for that role?

Mr McGuigan: We will be producing a report on workforce modernisation. Hopefully, the Committee will have an opportunity to discuss that with us. In that report, we refer to call management arrangements in the PSNI. In England and Wales, a high proportion of the staff involved in the call management centres are civilian staff. They do not require police training, although that is not to say that there are not supervisors who provide some assistance. To be fair, our frustration with this has been consistent over the years. We are now seeing some progress, but it is not where we would want it to be. Workforce modernisation will provide further evidence that the police have further to go on how this is delivered.

Mr Lynch: I have a couple of other points. It states that PCSPs should meet four times a year and that the policing committees should meet three times a year. Is that not a mismatch?

Mr Priestley: Sorry, I do not know where you are picking that up from.

Mr Lynch: I picked up somewhere about the number and format of meetings that PCSPs should meet four times a year.

Mr Priestley: Is that in the strategy itself?

Mr Lynch: Yes.

Mr Priestley: To be perfectly honest, I have not picked that up. We were satisfied that the strategy was being implemented and overseen. We leave it to the police and the Policing Board to sort out how it is actually implemented and deployed. However, we were happy with the general application of the strategy and how it had been developed, agreed and consulted on. I apologise that I had not picked up on that anomaly.

Mr McCartney: It is about how you get a consistency of approach in the positive aspects. I note the observation:

"In areas such as Foyle, Strabane and some areas of Ballymena and Ballymoney there had been improved Officer empowerment".

In other areas, it was weak. The success could be down to a number of factors. It may be because of a good local commander or good people doing it. Before that, the report refers to a lack of career path for neighbourhood officers. Is there a correlation there? Maybe officers do not see neighbourhood policing as the place that they want to be because it curtails their career prospects.

Mr Priestley: A concern among many neighbourhood officers that we spoke to was that they did not see a clear career path in neighbourhood policing. The police would say that Policing with the Community is wider than neighbourhood policing and that those skills are transferable across the policing spectrum. They would say that you can move from one bit to another and retain your career, with the ethos of Policing with the Community also being retained. The fact is that officers felt less able to progress within their chosen specialism; if you want to call neighbourhood policing a specialism. That remained a concern. Some moves were made. The retention of officers in neighbourhood units for a longer period had helped them to feel a little bit more empowered and respected within policing circles, but a career path was not clear to them.

Mr McCartney: I want to ask about the different attitudes and applications. What is the role of the inspectorate in that regard? Do you bring that to the Policing Board or to the operational side of the PSNI?

Mr McGuigan: We have been seeking a much more positive and progressive relationship with the Policing Board. It has improved significantly. There was a wonderful opportunity to brief the board on this report a couple of weeks ago, but other pressing issues that the board needed to discuss meant that it had to cancel that. We believe that the board could have significant influence on full delivery of Policing with the Community.

I was at the Policing with the Community awards in Belfast City Hall just a couple of weeks ago. Recognition was given to neighbourhood officers for the significant contributions that they make to local communities, and a lot of the nominations came from members of the community. That is a tremendous testimonial of the progress that the police have made. That is not the police thinking that they are doing a great job. It is the community wanting their officers to be recognised.

We pay testament to that. They are saying, "Actually, this is a great idea". It does not exist in other areas of policing; this is purely for policing with the community. A large number of the recipients were front line officers in neighbourhood policing roles or serving as response officers; it was a significant event and heart-warming to see people, particularly police officers, engage positively with members of the community who felt strongly enough about it to nominate them.

Mr McCartney: I was trying to make that point because part of your commentary is that other neighbourhood officers felt "constrained". If this is down to good people doing good jobs and a good leader saying, "Get on with it", yet there are constraints, are those constraints down to having the wrong people on the job or to a feeling that the structure does not encourage what we all see as being valuable? That can be lost in the structure because a bad leader can impact on what happens below him.

Mr Priestley: We probably saw a bit of movement on that this time round. Last time, a lot of it was down to how each district commander allocated their resources and focused on. This time, there is more of a corporate feel to it, a sense that this is happening because the organisation wants it to. In some small pockets, that had not really been rolled out, and, although much less the case than previously, there were difficult areas where policing with the community was not getting the support that it probably should. That is big progress.

Mr McCartney: So it is partly achieved and next time you will be looking to fully achieve it.

Mr Priestley: We hope so.

Mr McGlone: Mr McGuigan mentioned the awards, and they concern the good officers that we know of. Good policing is really about local knowledge and local credibility. The problems that we pick up on arise where the opposite is the case. For example, people in Magherafelt who want to contact police over the weekend must ring a call centre in Derry. Often, the person on the other end of the phone does not know where the caller is talking about. That is the first thing. My second point concerns problem children, and I do not know how you address it. You can instil good management practices but the simplest thing can cause policing to fall flat on its face, such as the phone call not returned or the follow-up not followed up. It is about how you ingrain good practice in officers. Now, it should be a matter of good common sense and, in many cases, good manners, but there are times when their absence drives people up the walls and leads them to say of police, "They're all the same. They will not ring you back or come out and see you, so why bother ringing them boys? They will not follow up on a problem that I reported to them six months ago". How do you make sure that simple good manners and good management permeate the organisation when we are still hitting those problems?

Mr McGuigan: Absolutely. The Chief Constable's vision around personal policing is clear: it is about taking people's issues very seriously and addressing them and responding in a personal way. They have set themselves some stretching targets here for calling back victims of crime etc. The latest data that we monitor shows that standing at over 90% now, having started from a low base at some stage. That needs to be tied into —

Mr McGlone: Sorry for interrupting. Is that over 90% of calls returned?

Mr McGuigan: Yes.

Mr McGlone: My argument is: why is it not 100%?

Mr McGuigan: Absolutely.

Mr McGlone: That is not even a standard to aim for. You should be able to hit the full 100% and if that is not happening ask why.

Mr McGuigan: There is an element of carrot and stick here. The reality is that the Police Ombudsman would say that there has been a reduction in the number of complaints on this issue. So, clearly, police have responded. Ultimately, to be perfectly fair, you could ask the police those questions. Our view on this is that people are absolutely entitled to 100%. However, it also needs to be linked to the performance of individual officers, so that their line managers, in assessing how the officer performed over the year, can report on any failure to respond to victims of crime in a way that they should have.

Mr Priestley: One of the disappointments was that the individual performance review system had not been implemented. That got in the way of rolling this out in a much better way and of embedding the ethos a policing with the community in how police deal with people. Because, it is what you said — good manners and returning calls are all part of the ethos of policing with the community. We would like to see individual performance linked directly to that policing with the community ethos. We were told that that had been implemented in April this year, but we have not yet been back to see how.

Mr Humphrey: I apologise for having had to nip out. Further to Mr McGlone's point: given the constituency that I represent, it is crucial that people get the comeback from police to their queries and concerns. Everyone knows that there are huge demands on the resource and that police are under pressure at times, particularly areas such as mine in north Belfast. A failure to respond means communities feel that they have at times been thrown to the wolves. At that point, others step into the void, which none of us wants. I just want to reinforce the point that we need to move on from that.

It takes a long time for community officers to build up a good rapport and relationship with communities. Mine is probably an operational question that you may not be able to answer. Has long and hard thought been given to deploying those people in, for example, riot situations where all that work can dissipate in no time?

Mr McGuigan: Absolutely. The difficulty for policing is that an officer may have to don protective gear and police disorder one day and on the following present a softer image and go back in to deal with communities again. That having been said, the way that public order is dealt with at the minute — with the use of tactical support groups, Landrovers, water cannon, etc — neighbourhood officers generally have a secondary role and would not be in the front line in dealing with that level of conflict. However, they are in the next day to do the things that they have to. Whether investigating crime or dealing with issues such as neighbourhood fall-outs, domestic abuse or whatever, they have to be there.

The Chairperson: Thank you very much, Mr Priestly.