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The limits of 'professionalisation from above': On the 're-professionalisation' of street-level policing in England

Clifford Bacon
University of Salford, UK

Bill Hebenton
The University of Manchester, UK

Leo McCann
University of York, UK

Abstract

The occupation of policing is in crisis. Criticism of police failings has created intense pressure for the traditional 'occupational closure' model of policing as a craft to be replaced by new 'professional' models associated with 'evidence-based policing', harm reduction, risk management and vulnerability. Various change initiatives have amounted to the 're-professionalisation' of policing, whereby previous models of police professionalism based on craft, discretion and judgement have been abandoned and replaced by new protocols, guidelines and enhanced external scrutiny. This article explores how these changes are interpreted by operational police officers, using qualitative interviews and ethnographic fieldwork to explore officers' application and understanding of the new requirements. Whereas some literature argues that 'police culture' remains largely unchanged, our data illustrate how officers' daily routines are in a state of enforced flux. While there was some limited support for the rationale for change, officers were highly critical of the practical implementation of policing vulnerability, were sceptical of the new doctrine of 'professionalism', and resentful of new managerial controls and priorities. This does not amount to the stubborn persistence of a 'reform-proof' police culture. Rather, officers

Corresponding author:
Leo McCann, School for Business and Society, University of York, Church Lane, York YO10 5DD, UK.
Email: leo.mccann@york.ac.uk

described substantial change to the everyday culture and practice of policing, in ways they regard as confused, self-defeating and unworkable. We argue that professionalisation imposed 'from above' via dogmatic managerial logic can have detrimental implications for occupations and the public they serve.

Keywords
Policing, professionalisation, street-level bureaucracy, vulnerability

Introduction

Police services are enveloped by organisational, legal and doctrinal change as government agencies attempt to improve their performance and modernise their practices. A discourse often invoked in the justification for improvement and modernization efforts is 'professionalism'; a recurring notion since the 1970s (Lotz and Regoli, 1977; Walker, 1976). A powerful, multifaceted drive to make policing more 'professional' is ongoing in policing in England and Wales, involving major organisational, educational and cultural change in line with recent doctrinal trends for police forces to shift their operations from a punitive focus on crime suppression and towards a focus on vulnerability, risk management and harm reduction (Aliverti, 2020; Bartkowiak-Theron and Asquith, 2012; Holdaway, 2017; Mason, 2020; Rowe and Rowe, 2021; Williams et al., 2019).

This article explores the impact of this multifaceted process at 'street level', via fieldwork with serving officers in an English city. It demonstrates how operational police understand changes associated with policies that aim to make the police 'professional'. Overwhelmingly, officers were sceptical about the changes, describing them as a set of unworkable managerial policies and doctrines imposed from above. But this is not to say that the reforms were defeated by the resistance of an entrenched 'police culture'. Changes to practice and operational behaviour have had substantial traction, deeply affecting everyday police activities. But, rather than representing a successful move away from traditional 'cop culture' and towards 'professionalism', the overall outcome was troubling; officers complained of organisational paralysis and a decline in crucial aspects of policing craft amid severe resourcing strains brought on by austerity measures. The situation is not dissimilar from that witnessed in other public organisations where traditional forms of occupational practice have been recast by New Public Management-style interventions (Exworthy and Halford, 1999; Leicht and Fennell, 2001; Wolcott, 2003).

There are several interrelated processes involved in 'professionalizing' the police in England and Wales. These include moving police knowledge and activity away from traditional 'craft' practices and embracing 'evidence-based policing' (especially by following guidelines set by recently established arms-length bodies such as the College of Policing); moving police education and training out of house and into higher education (HE) institutions; and strengthening codes of ethics and professional standards (Holdaway, 2017; Martin, 2021; Neyroud, 2011; Sherman, 2013; Williams et al., 2019). An important historical marker that represented the rationale for changes in these directions was a review of police education and training undertaken in 2011 by Peter Neyroud

at the behest of the then Home Secretary Theresa May. Neyroud described his report as 'a moment of radical change' (Neyroud, 2011: 2). It called for the development of a new professional body that would 'enable a transformation of the culture of learning in the police service' (Neyroud, 2011: 2). The report regularly mentions 'professions', 'professionalism' and 'evidence-based' policing, and regards them as key features of a revamped police service that would abandon its outdated traditions of in-house learning and thereby end the reproduction of a troublesome police 'craft'. The establishment of the College of Policing was a direct outcome of this report. With a College that establishes 'what works' in policing, the aim is for police education and training to work from a standardised 'evidence-base' that will be put to work across all aspects of police practice. Policing would thereby be 're-professionalised'; vestiges of police craft would be removed, to be replaced with the 'traits' often associated with 'professional' occupations (Holdaway, 2017; Martin, 2021).

However, the various meanings of 'professionalism' are always contested in an occupation or workplace, especially in terms of who or what are the driving forces behind these changes (Holdaway, 1977; Martin, 2021; Williams et al., 2019). Professionalisation programmes can be driven from within, largely by the members of an occupation in efforts to achieve greater recognition, discretion and autonomy, and to enlarge their jurisdictions, perhaps into areas controlled by other groups (Abbott, 1998). This is professionalisation 'from below' or 'from within' which is often understood by occupational members as a worthwhile, legitimate struggle (Wilensky, 1964). But other occupations have been *subjected to professionalisation*, where 'professionalism' is an external set of structures, changes and behaviours forced onto an occupation, often in response to failures, lack of oversight, crises and scandals. This is 'professionalisation from above' (Evetts, 2011; Heslop, 2011: 314). In England, numerous official reports into police institutional failings (such as the Stephen Lawrence case, the Hillsborough disaster and controversies relating to undercover operations, see Hillsborough Independent Panel, 2012; House of Commons Home Affairs Committee, 2021; MacPherson Stephen Lawrence Inquiry, 1999; Undercover Policing Inquiry, 2022) have evidenced weak internal oversight, poor professional standards and an entrenched 'canteen culture' (Waddington, 1999). Such concern has acted as a rationale for enhanced external regulation, an arms-length professional association and behavioural change within the ranks; changes now all subsumed under the rubric of 'professionalisation' and largely imposed from above via a complex range of central government and arms-length regulatory and expert bodies.

There is little doubt that policing in the United Kingdom has a long history of challenges and failures. It is also true that police culture has long been problematic, for numerous reasons (Banton, 1964; Charman, 2017; Loftus, 2009, 2010; Pearson and Rowe, 2020; Prokos and Padavic, 2002; Reiner, 2010). However, viewed from the level of police officers from Constable to Inspector level, the street-level impacts of professionalisation from above appear quite different from the optimistic official picture of rational change and evidence-based modernization. At issue here are the specific manifestations and meanings of 'professionalism'. What does a professionalisation process actually entail and what are its effects at street level, especially in an era in which priorities need to be recalculated due to distinct political pressures and limited resources?

What happens when an occupation that long ago established its own formations and meanings of professionalism becomes subjected to a new professionalisation drive from above, in an awkward process described by Holdaway (2017) as 're-professionalisation'?

The article explores these questions in seven further sections. First, we outline the concept of re-professionalisation, arguing that its manifestation in UK policing is managerialist in nature and acts as a means of disciplinary control, with the emphasis placed strongly on compliance rather than on discretion or autonomy. Second, the mechanisms of the current re-professionalisation of policing are articulated, explaining how and why they emerged. Third we outline our ethnographic methodology. Fourth, we analyse two main themes from our data, namely 'the changing nature of policing practice' and 'problematic manifestations of professional competency'. Our discussion and conclusion sections argue that, while the drivers for modernisation and development of policing remain ineluctable, there are dangers for an occupation and its clients if key aspects of occupational practice historically engrained in 'practical professionalism' are unintentionally missed or intentionally discarded and reconfigured via management-driven 're-professionalisation' programmes.

'Professionalisation from above' as a disciplinary means of organisational control

The characteristics of self-regulation, discretion and autonomy are traditionally thought to be core traits of professions (Freidson, 2001; Green and Gates, 2014; Muzio et al., 2019), defining organisational direction and practice and instilling occupational closure in terms of expertise and jurisdiction (Ackroyd, 1996). Central to the realisation of the nature and influence of occupational closure are matters of disciplinary logic and organisational control (Abbott, 1998; Evetts, 2011; Fournier, 1999; Gilling, 2014). Fournier (1999: 228) describes disciplinary logic as 'the network of accountability within which the professions have to inscribe their practice and expertise in order to maintain their place in a liberal government'.

While professions are usually understood to retain powerful influences in modern society (Abbott, 1998), it is always possible for professions to undergo change. Sometimes change is forcibly imposed following criticism for failures, scandals and malpractice (Muzio et al., 2019). In such cases, forms of external control (typically based around managerial and auditory logic) are strengthened, and an occupation's own internal values about what it means to be 'professional' are challenged and de-legitimated. In the case of policing in England and Wales, 're-professionalism' is a powerful example of 'professionalisation from above'; a set of processes whereby traditional forms of police 'craft' or 'practical professionalism' (Bittner, 1967; Cain, 1973; Walker, 1976) are being replaced and de-legitimated by doctrinal adaptation, changes to education and training and the imposition of new managerial control mechanisms.

Control is exerted by external regulation, changed operational guidance, accountability through performance-related measures, hierarchical structures of decision-making and the standardisation of work practice (Gundhus, 2012; Heslop, 2011; Lumsden, 2017;

Power, 2010). Institutionally determined statistics, measurements of performance and limited public consultation are the external face of achievement, transparency and accountability (Power, 2010). Internally, there is often considerable conflict between frontline workers and senior managers over the extent and acceptance of top-down control and its impact on street-level practice and discretion (Lipsky, 2010; Maynard-Moody and Musheno, 2003; Moskos, 2008).

Of course, any large-scale transformation of institutional structures, functions, standards and practice is complex and difficult (Fournier, 1999). We cannot assume that any form of top-down change process will automatically achieve management's intended aims. In this respect, the close study of the daily working practices of occupational employees is vital to our understanding of the impacts of professionalisation programmes on occupational behaviour (Barley and Kunda, 2001; Delbridge and Sallaz, 2015). Ethnographic studies of police patrol work have long featured worker–management conflict over control of practice (Gundhus, 2005, 2012; Herbert, 2001; Moskos, 2008; Rowe, 2007; Rowe et al., 2016). Focusing on discretional autonomy in daily decision-making (Gundhus, 2005; Rowe, 2007; Rowe et al., 2016) and the implementation of new 'evidence-based' procedures (Gundhus, 2012), recent studies indicate the failure of the police professionalisation project to secure 'double closure'; that is, genuine acceptance and workability at both senior management and 'rank-and-file' operator level. The legitimacy of police practice and knowledge is a recurrent theme in such studies (Lumsden, 2017; Williams et al., 2019). For example, as Rowe et al. (2016: 285) conclude on policing in England:

> Rather than a process of professionalisation from below, this is a process driven from above and outside and more about the control of discretion than the development of the workforce.

Such factors play significant roles in our analysis. If 'professionalisation' in policing is regarded by officers not as a legitimate, internal struggle to establish more prestige and autonomy for police officers, but as an external imposition, then it is likely to be perceived as something that will confuse, change and erode many of the core features of the craft of policing (Cockcroft and Beattie, 2009; Courpasson and Monties, 2017; Herbert, 2001; Heslop, 2011; Lumsden, 2017; Moskos, 2008). Professionalisation, therefore, will be regarded not as the expansion of occupational autonomy and discretion, but as the imposition of procedures and controls. The following section explores these conflicts over the meaning of professionalism in further detail.

Professionalism, craft and managerialism: Understanding the 're-professionalisation' of policing

Concepts of occupational culture, professionalism, and managerialism are complex and contested. Traditional notions of 'police professionalism' regard policing as a craft-based occupation, or as a form of 'practical professionalism' (Bittner, 1967; Cain, 1973; Reiner, 2010; Walker, 1976), with attributes, as Manning (1977) describes, of self-esteem, organisational autonomy, occupational solidarity and traditional masculinity bound up in the reinforcement of values and practices through the use of operational discretion and

the transfer of knowledge and skills from officer to officer. Its basis lies in the experience of coping with difficult situations where solutions rely on judgement and improvisation. It is a form of operational culture derived largely from internal processes of training and socialisation (Charman, 2017; Moskos, 2008; Van Maanen, 1973). The concern is often about achieving an immediate outcome rather than focusing on process. Nevertheless, practical professionalism is powerfully connected to officers' views of the 'core police role'; what officers believe the police 'should' be for. Articulations of this 'core' role circulate around themes of 'proactive' investigations, public order maintenance and delivering justice for victims of crime.

Practical police professionalism, therefore, has many similarities with Lipsky's classic notion of 'street-level bureaucracy', where public officials retain wide discretion (perhaps excessive discretion) over how official policy is delivered 'on the ground' (Lipsky, 2010). While quite different from the higher-status professions of medicine, architecture or law, the broad discretion enjoyed by police officers affords them scope to develop personal styles of practice. Like other professions, society has also granted police officers both an exclusive licence to practice their craft and certain special legal protections.

An extra layer of complexity and controversy surrounds the related notion of 'cop culture'. Wrapped into practical professionalism and police craft are the less formal and often problematic aspects of police culture. Officers embody a profound sense of collective identity that is often rendered through the trappings of a 'cop culture' that is mistrustful of outsiders and resentful and wary of external scrutiny (Cockcroft, 2013; Loftus, 2009). This culture has been the subject of intense criticism from those advocating the modernization and change of police services (see, for example, Sherman, 2013), although several studies (such as Davies and Thomas, 2008; Loftus, 2009, 2010) suggest that most of Manning's classic traits remain in place today, suggesting that efforts at police modernization have limited effects given the force of cultural inertia. Many would recognise the enduring importance of occupational culture. But 'cop culture' – like any form of occupational culture – is not cast in stone. Rather, it is multifaceted, complex, contested, and capable of adaptation and change (Chan, 2001; Chappell and Lanze-Kaduce, 2010; Charman, 2017; Cockcroft, 2013; Demirkol and Nalla, 2020; Pearson and Rowe, 2020; Silvestri, 2017; Waddington, 1999). Efforts to modernise police practice have explicitly targeted a problematic 'police culture' in their rhetoric about the need for change. In doing so, reform drives have often attacked and rhetorically downgraded not only 'cop culture', but also any traditional forms of police knowledge, craft or practical professionalism.

Re-professionalisation has involved key 'independent' internal and external actors working to transform the landscape of policing priorities, guidelines, knowledge, practice and scrutiny (Holdaway, 2017). In 2012 Sir Thomas Winsor, who had just completed a review of police pay and conditions, was appointed by Theresa May as the first Chief Inspector of Her Majesty's Inspectorate of Constabulary (HMIC) drawn from outside police ranks. This brought on a sea-change in the tone, language and content of the HMIC (recently expanded to Her Majesty's Inspectorate of Constabulary and Fire & Rescue Services, HMICFRS) inspection programme, from a historical focus on serious

and acquisitive crime, anti-social behaviour and neighbourhood policing, to a 'vulnerability' and 'harm-reduction' agenda prioritising issues such as honour-based violence, sexual offences and domestic violence (HMIC, 2014). Reflecting on historical failures in protecting those most vulnerable in society (Aliverti, 2020), newly prescribed standardised competencies, skills and behavioural standards required to address deficiencies were aligned with a more 'scientific', evidence-based approach attuned to the dynamics of the 'audit society' (Power, 1997) and 'New Public Management' (NPM) that have dominated public administration since the early 1990s (Bevan and Hood, 2006; Cockcroft and Beattie, 2009; Gilling, 2014; Hood, 1991; O'Reilly and Reed, 2011). Within this context, Power (1997: 138) advocates an examination of the instruments of institutional control of practice to enable analysis of the outputs and consequences of management by audit, performance and process.

Audit has become a self-defining logic for prioritising measurable tasks and analysing outputs. A powerful example of this logic is the management of domestic violence (Medina Ariza et al., 2016; Myhill and Johnson, 2016; Rowe, 2007). A risk-centred, evidence-based, procedural approach to domestic violence policing places strong limits on discretionary action and the autonomy of street-level officer craft and decision-making. This has been developing across policing practice since the 1990s (Ericson and Haggerty, 1997). Ethnographic studies by Rowe (2007) and, more recently Myhill (2017), point to officers' limited, discretionary subversion of procedure, in a landscape of confusion and disagreement with what constitutes 'best practice' and 'what works', and punitive directives around presumptive arrest and fear of failure (including the threat of disciplinary action and a perceived lack of management support). Similar processes, such as the various iterations of the custody booking-in process (including vulnerability risk assessments), 'missing from home' investigations, mental health issues and crime screening, emanate and develop from HMICFRS inspection recommendations, becoming the new focus of police activity (HMICFRS, 2021).

These multifaceted reforms represent sustained attempts from several official bodies to fundamentally reshape the culture and priorities of policing as an occupation, to rethink how police knowledge is constructed and deployed, and to re-evaluate and re-regulate the policing landscape. As a whole, they amount to a re-professionalisation of policing, the aims and goals of which are typically championed by reform-driven organisations such as the College of Policing, as long-overdue and successful steps away from policing as 'a craft' (associated with an outdated cop culture and outmoded priorities around crime suppression), and towards policing as 'a profession' (associated with evidence-based policing, training in HE institutions, and new priorities around vulnerability). It remains unclear, however, how policing organisations and police officers have responded to these changes, and the realities 'on the ground' might not match the picture portrayed in official documents about the new 'professional' policing in England and Wales.

Methods and data

This article explores how the changing landscape of police doctrine, priorities, management, education and evaluation under the guise of 're-professionalisation' has impacted

on 'street-level' policing. Our focus is on how police officers interpret the impact of the re-professionalization agenda and our research questions were two-fold: first, what have been the impacts of the re-professionalisation project at street-level? Second, how do officers interpret the impact of these changes to work practices, to occupational culture and to the service they deliver to the public?

We took an ethnographic approach to answering these questions. Ethnographic fieldwork can provide a rich picture of society and culture, beliefs, values and the structure of behaviour, unpacking participants' frameworks of understanding and action (Hammersley and Atkinson, 2007; Wolcott, 2001). Ethnographic research and writing have a very rich history in policing research (Bacon et al., 2020; Chappell and Lanze-Kaduce, 2010; Loftus, 2009; Moskos, 2008; Punch, 1979; Rowe and Rowe, 2021; Van Maanen, 1973). Our aim was to have a flexible approach and to potentially reassess our focus on the discovery of new iterations of practice (Hunt and Symonds, 1995), using ethnographic research as a tool to make visible those discretionary aspects of policing practice and activity that are often unseen or unaccounted for by supervisory oversight or data input requirements (Rowe, 2007). We explored street-level manifestations of policing's current re-professionalisation programme, focusing on how officers' daily shifts are constructed and performed, and evaluating how police officers react to and interpret the logics and meanings of the newly 'professionalised' era.

Our data are based on in-depth interviews with 35 officers, followed by 100 hours of observations of routine patrols. University ethical clearance for the study was secured, and a written agreement to carry out the research at a force in England (here given the pseudonym 'Eastside') was agreed between the force and the researchers following a request to the force's research department. The empirical fieldwork and data collection for this study were undertaken by the lead author, a retired police officer with 30 years' service, 18 at Inspector rank. The research was undertaken at the same force where the researcher was employed, but 2–3 years after his retirement. The researcher was very much aware that his presence might have an impact on the phenomena studied (Hammersley and Atkinson, 2007). Ethical and validity issues around 'insider/outsider' research viability are acknowledged (Hodkinson, 2005; Perryman, 2011) in particular the conundrum over how to separate the researcher's world-view of practice from the practices being observed; how to judge the ethical, legal and academic boundaries between the need for passive observation and the occasional need for intervention, in particular when the safety of the public or officers was at risk; and how to gain the trust of officers in a high-risk job working often without supervision. Such dilemmas were addressed partly through agreement of ethical protocols with the participating force and the host university, through regular advice and discussion among the co-authors, and by personal reflections and discussions with a further independent academic mentor during the observation period. Our use of in-depth, semi-structured interviews was also helpful in offsetting the risk of researcher bias. These interviews provided access to a range of organisational perspectives and gave participants wide scope to elucidate their own deeply-held opinions and experiences.

Data were collected firstly via semi-structured interviews in police stations in two divisions (Districts 1 and 2), and secondly via ethnographic observations (in police cars and vans) of patrol work during daily shifts on one of those divisions (District 1, a

Table 1. Profiles of interview respondents.

Interview number	Rank	Role	Years of service
1	Sergeant	Custody	27
2	Sergeant	Custody	16
3	Sergeant	Custody	11
4	Sergeant	Custody	22
5	Inspector	Response	24
6	Detective Inspector	CID	14
7	Sergeant	Custody	28
8	PC	Response	8
9	PC	Response	5
10	Sergeant	Project Team	14
11	PC	Project Team	8
12	PC	Response	4
13	PC	Response	7
14	PC	Response	3
15	PC	Response	4
16	PC	Response	3
17	PC	Response	6
18	PC	Response	9
19	Assist Chief Constable	Senior Leadership	29
20	Inspector	Response	21
21	Detective Constable	CID	8
22	Detective Sergeant	CID	16
23	Detective Sergeant	CID	15
24	Inspector	Response	12
25	PC	Response	26
26	Sergeant	Response	25
27	Detective Constable	CID	7
28	Inspector	Response	18
29	Inspector	Response	25
30	PC	Response	16
31	Superintendent	Operations	25
32	Deputy Chief Constable	Operations	28
33	Inspector	Response	19
34	Sergeant	Response	14
35	PC	Response	18
36	HMICFRIS Director	–	–

high-incident, city centre area). Thirty-five in-depth interviews were conducted in a 9-month period between 2015 and 2016; 31 with officers of the rank of Constable to Inspector and 3 with senior ranking officers (for anonymised details of the respondents see Table 1). A further interview was conducted with a senior HMICFRS officer.

Interviews were carried out in the stations where officers were based and were recorded and transcribed within days of completion.

Analysis of these interviews helped to direct the scope of the observation period. In July 2017, 100 hours of observations (early and late shifts) were conducted which allowed the researcher to generate a very detailed set of research field notes involving numerous ad hoc discussions with officers working from one patrol relief, consisting of 30 Constables, 4 Sergeants and 1 Inspector. Their length of service ranged from 6 months to 15 years. Unrestricted access was provided to all areas and staff in the divisional station. On a daily basis the researcher was assigned to a mobile patrol (consisting of either one or two officers) for a 10-hour shift. Observational field notes were recorded in situ in notebooks, with fuller transcriptions written within 2 days. Texts were written up in a series of vignettes to convey the full context of the environment, the incidents observed, and the outcomes and views of the officers and the researcher. Data were analysed by way of regularly reading and sharing the texts among the research team, gradually extracting and agreeing on which passages were the most germane to our two research questions. In the empirical sections below, we first present data that explore the changing nature of practice; the daily routines and expectations driven by directives and process. Second, we present the theme of the problematic manifestations of professional competence, involving detailed discussion of issues relating to skill levels, discretion and legitimacy.

We acknowledge the limitations of our research design. Our study describes and analyses actions and views from one police force in England and Wales at one point in time. As regards location, we are confident that our findings relating to this urban police force are reliable; interview data from two divisions with distinctive differences in demographics and incident volume and type were strikingly similar. We cannot make any further claims as to the generalisability of our results to other forces elsewhere in the country. Themes arising from the interviews were similarly supportive of the themes that emerged from observational research. As regards time, there is always the possibility that the practices, dynamics and rationale associated with re-professionalisation will eventually become more widely accepted and supported by rank-and-file officers, especially as a larger proportion of the ranks are socialised into the new era and gain HE qualifications as they do so; a process now well underway (Charman, 2017). Limitations of space and time are always a drawback of qualitative fieldwork, but a drawback balanced against the advantages provided by the richness of naturalistic and ideographic data.

Theme 1: The changing nature of policing practice

We begin our empirical discussions with Theme 1: ‘the changing nature of policing practice’. Here we explore the organisational requirements and expectations of the daily roles and tasks of patrol officers, documenting the practical requirements of the re-professionalisation project (new formations of knowledge, and new priorities and audit systems). One of the most striking findings was the significant shift in the balance of time officers spent between dealing with the focused priority of vulnerability (incorporating supporting community-based services) and proactive attempts to prevent, investigate and detect crime. Officers’ saw their treasured definition of the ‘core police role’ as critically

endangered or totally eroded. The changing nature of policing priorities was emphasised in virtually every interview and observed on every shift. In response to the question 'What is the priority for operational officers?' an officer summed up the prevalent view:

> The main priority is identifying and preventing vulnerability in all its forms. Previously it was serious and acquisitive crime. [. . .] But quite quickly that went and vulnerability became what we were about. So now, [. . .] looking in detail at missing from homes, of which there is a lot, mental health and things like child sexual exploitation-related vulnerability. It takes a huge amount of time. (Interview number 2)

Much of the time on shifts observed was taken up dealing with such incidents. A good example was the first two shifts observed. This involved spending 4 hours (with two officers) in a hospital emergency department guarding a detainee with a minor injury, while four other officers were also present, guarding another similar detainee and a person waiting for a voluntary mental health assessment. This was when 10 officers were working the shift. This was followed by a request to deal with 'violent males' with suspected mental health issues (4 hours); a request by social services from an area outside of Eastside to do a welfare check on two children who hadn't attended school and were believed to be staying with extended family members (3 hours); and a domestic violence incident (4 hours). The patrol Inspector commented on the first shift as a whole, noting that he had also been covering his neighbouring subdivision:

> He said that he and most of the staff on the other subdivision (12 officers) had been tied up all shift with seven 'missing from homes', in particular a suicidal couple who had phoned the police saying they were going to kill themselves by taking an overdose. Eventually, after several hours they were found safe and well. (Observation field-notes)

'Vulnerability' relates both to specific types of incident, such as sexual offences, child sexual abuse, honour-based violence, domestic violence, missing from homes, and incidents where the generic health and welfare conditions of an individual involved or the situation they are in places them at a perceived high level of vulnerability (typically poor mental health, and or alcohol and drug abuse). This 'vulnerability' frame of reference was all-encompassing, dominating the allocation of incidents, the time spent dealing with them and dictating how they were dealt with. Officers reported that the volume of incidents in this domain had increased significantly. Many claimed that other agencies (social care, National Health Service hospitals and ambulance services) were also struggling with cutbacks and demand overload, and that the police (even after cutbacks of its own) was being asked to backfill. In Eastside, the police were effectively working as first responders and daily carers to 'social' cases requiring a 24/7, emergency response.

Dealing with vulnerability incidents was approached by officers with both a silo, prescriptive mentality to specified types of incident (individual procedures for individual incident types such as domestic violence, sexual offences, missing from homes), and a more generic approach to general social issues, with ad hoc, on the spot assessments of levels of vulnerability and necessary actions to be taken, governed by more general, often rather vague, policy. In classic Lipskian style, grey areas were interpreted on the

street (especially with regard to mental health-related incidents). For example, a Sergeant commenting on the application of policy on powers of arrest in mental health cases said,

> Policy is too confusing. There's no guidance on what to do, just, 'this is your 136 power[1] and it's up to you to justify using it and justify your decision-making'. (Interview number 10)

The approach implies the use of both non-negotiable, precautionary protocols, specifically around vulnerability issues, that officers must abide by (Bartkowiak-Theron and Asquith, 2014), and more discretionary directives, all bound by the fear of failure and ensuing potential disciplinary action (Cummins, 2012). Both requirements were time-consuming, requiring officers to either mandatorily tick every process box on the street and back at the station, or required considerable time on-scene in a sense of inertia, knowing that something could not be left or ignored, but not being sure exactly what to do or why. In theory the 'evidence-based' vulnerability and risk-reduction guidelines provided clear checklists for officers at all levels. In practical terms, the messiness of street-level reality meant that decision-making almost always required compromises, lengthy discussions and improvisations (Lipsky, 2010; Maynard-Moody and Musheno, 2003; Zacka, 2017).

The 'core police role' in the psyche of operational officers under the traditions of police 'craft' or 'practical professionalism' had been focused on crime investigation, that is, 'bringing offenders to justice' in a 'proactive' manner. These are the foundations of police craft passed down through routine occupational behaviour and expectations and the acquisition of experiential knowledge (Gundhus, 2012; Lumsden, 2017; Rowe et al., 2016). It also has powerful connections to the 'police culture' that Charman, Loftus, Waddington, and many others describe. However, it is precisely this form of policing that our officers claim has declined precipitously as the re-professionalisation project has taken hold.

Replacing the tasks and knowledge of 'proactive' policing associated with traditional police craft was a new logic for police incident prioritisation in Eastside. This was the mantra of 'threat, harm and risk'; criteria documented in official policy and used for staff guidance to distinguish potential vulnerability. When asked what the main senior leadership priorities were, an officer replied:

> Unless it's threat, harm or risk – or vulnerability – it's largely being written off. It was probably around 2014 when it came into the general sphere of work and you thought, 'that's how you deal with it'. (Interview number 3)

'Screening out' incidents and reports of crime, based on the immediate threat, harm or risk posed to the person, was a logic used by Eastside police force to rationalise the volume of incidents officers are required to attend. Describing the growing rate of 'screen outs' for crime reports (not including general incidents), an officer suggested:

> You are looking, just for this division, between 10,000–15,000 crimes a month. We used to be around 6,000, but with NCRS[2] standards and other things it's gone up. It's about 70% that we screen out just to survive. It used to be about 45%. (Interview number 35)

Incidents screened out were typically 'volume' crime including thefts, minor assaults, car crime, burglary and less serious robberies, even including 'positive line' crimes (those with potential CCTV evidence or a witness). Specific crimes and incidents related to vulnerability (such as domestic violence) were always screened in regardless of the circumstances, reflecting the strong priority placed on 'vulnerability'-type incidents by reforming agencies such as the College of Policing, HMICFRS, and Police and Crime Commissioners. Commenting on the logic of this process an officer stated:

> Once we have been told about someone, even if the crime hasn't happened and the person who has mental health issues has imagined it as part of their condition. If that comes in, even though it never happened – if we screen that out, are their needs being addressed? They need to see a cop just to get the right support. Is that what the cops are there for? (Interview number 34)

The emphasis in much of the 'police culture' literature (Davies and Thomas, 2008; Kiely and Peek, 2002; Loftus, 2009, 2010; Reiner, 2000) is on the stubborn persistence of the traditional law enforcement, crime-fighting role of the police. More recently, Charman (2017: 6) suggests there has been a clear shift from fighting crime to safeguarding. She suggests that:

> Policing and police officers, it could be argued, are now more comfortable with their social identity as 'peacekeepers' rather than 'crime fighters'. The adherence to crime-fighting has been shed both literally and figuratively.

While our Eastside officers acknowledged this trend in changing role expectations and reality on the streets, we found that they tended to be far less accepting of these changes than Charman implies. Many Eastside officers described their current role using disdainful terms such as: 'emergency social service', 'pseudo social workers' and 'ambulance chasers'. The tone of officer language reflected this shift with references made to: 'safeguarding', 'dealing with threat, harm and risk', 'dealing with vulnerability', 'protecting people', 'keeping people safe', 'making sure no-one dies' and 'looking after people's welfare'. A conversation between the researcher and two officers while on patrol in a police van typifies opinion:

First officer: It's frustrating. The job is all about vulnerability. Chasing ambulances around. [. . .] We don't get time to deal with crime investigation, the crime queue and files. [. . .] I'm disappointed as that is what I thought I would be doing. I love the job. I really enjoy response work. I was intending to go into CID[3] but I've stayed in response. I wouldn't join the CID now I've seen how the force deals with crime. I think the force has improved with DV[4] incidents. There's a lot of bureaucracy around DV and high-risk missings and possibly sexual offences. DV and sexual offences, we should be dealing with them properly, but now our biggest volume of work is mental health. We are like ambulances. It's frustrating because we shouldn't be doing the work of other agencies who have cut services. For example, why should we stay with someone who has taken spice just to ensure their welfare and safety? It's a

medical, health issue. Also why should we wait for hours with a 136 patient at A&E[5] when they have got security and a secure room? Because of all that we do no proactive work at all.

Second officer: I agree. It's not the job I thought it was going to be. I'm not involved in investigating crime to any degree.

[Observation field-notes]

Speech like this could be interpreted as the persistence of traditional 'cop culture'. But officers described this culture almost as a thing of the past. Their daily actions almost never reflected the valued 'core' traditions of proactive investigations, order maintenance and justice for victims. Officers felt exasperated and disempowered. Frustration at the time spent dealing with vulnerability issues (both those thought valuable and those considered time-wasting), was exacerbated by detailed bureaucratic procedures associated with the new audit culture of re-professionalised policing. Domestic abuse, missing from home and custody 'booking in' policies were those most often cited by officers as examples of risk-averse, time-consuming, managerial edicts that reflect the intense pressure Eastside was under to present a convincing audit trail of 'effective' policing of vulnerability incidents. An officer discussed this in an interview:

> What we have to do now is far, far more time consuming than what we ever had to do. Everything we do now is about safeguarding. A straightforward domestic can tie you up for five or six hours because you've got to record everything, do a DASH, 1–27 update,[6] you might have to do a referral to social services, you've got to safeguard everybody, bodycam, download the bodycam footage. I agree with the safeguarding aspect. We didn't safeguard years ago like we do now. That's a good thing. But it's time consuming and that's not recognised. (Interview number 14)

Some officers who were new to the service expressed satisfaction with the 'comfort blanket' of prescribed process that offered them guidance at incidents and a level of standardised consistency. Those with more experience tended to blame 'faceless' senior managers for promoting risk-averse and unworkable bureaucracy. For example:

> The Chief Constable has brought in a model of policing with silo mentalities to the point where they would now withstand a holocaust. Underneath that we have people who are process-driven, whose ideas of managing a situation is to complete all the process. We need to ask why we are doing the process and why we do certain things. (Interview number 7)

Time and again, well-meaning 'harm reduction' and 'victim-centred' directives created unintended outcomes that – in officers' views – actually compromised the service they could deliver. From their perspective, rather than empowering officers to provide a more 'professional' quality of service based on 'evidence-based' protocols, the operationalisation of this new brand of professionalism was creating organisational paralysis. An Inspector suggested:

> We are a very confused organisation. On the one hand we say to people 'you've got some discretion at domestics, use it'. Then on the other hand the force are sending out presentations that say 'if you don't arrest at a domestic there has got to be some exceptional reasons why'. (Interview number 6)

Officers' interpretation of such directives erred on the side of self-preservation, in many cases taking action they genuinely believed was not in the interest of those involved.

Theme 2: Problematic manifestations of professional competency

This second empirical theme relates more directly to the audit culture and New Public Management. NPM generates a powerful dynamic that aims to reduce the scope and reach of professional knowledge to discrete tasks that can be broken down and measured (Hood, 1991; Power, 2010). This can be very problematic. Many practical elements of policing are not sighted by governing bodies or senior management, allowing skills and service levels to be poorly understood and – paradoxically – often unchecked. In addition, the focus and increased time spent on vulnerability and related matters and the corresponding significant reduction in opportunities to investigate crime and perform proactive work, appears to have led to a deskilling of previously established practices that were traditionally seen as crucial to the provision of effective policing, and important elements of the 'core police role'.

Observational fieldwork revealed a powerful issue unforeseen to the researchers and not mentioned in the interviews, namely inadequate leadership, decision-making and knowledge at the scene of incidents. The researcher, on patrol in a van with two officers noted:

> We were doing a blue-light run in answer to a call from paramedics but the officers chose to re-route to a street disturbance because we were in a van. On arrival the scene was chaotic. There were about ten people milling around. A woman who appeared drunk was staggering near an ambulance and four officers were either speaking to potential witnesses or trying to get sense out of the woman. A bystander had a broken nose and his shirt was covered in blood. A male being held in a police car was eventually transferred to our van. He became aggressive, continually screaming and banging on the inside of the van. PC 'Pete' tried to calm him down but to no avail. He appeared to be either drunk or had mental health issues. The situation remained the same for about ten, fifteen minutes and I felt I had to advise Pete to speak to the officer dealing with the incident to clarify what was happening and, if the man was to be arrested, to get him out of the area and to the station ASAP. An officer eventually came to the van, opened the rear doors and told the male inside he was under arrest on suspicion of assault. Enroute to the station I reflected on the fact that I couldn't just stand around and do nothing. I was alarmed by what I'd seen. Why did it take the officers over thirty minutes to establish what was happening and to arrest the male? Was the male's detention legal if he was detained in a car and van for thirty minutes before being told he was under arrest? Six officers were at a basic, routine incident, yet no one appeared to take control. The situation just drifted whilst a man in a police van was potentially injuring himself and winding up the victim, witnesses and passers-by. (Observation field-notes)

This pattern was common. There was little, if any, discussion or debrief after attending incidents, both on the streets and back at the station. Results were passed to the communicator. Officers moved from job to job. Sergeants primarily spent the entire shift sat together at computers in the main response office in the station. Supervision on the streets was minimal, but Sergeants worked through heavy workloads of administrative tasks while keeping an eye on activities on the computerised incident log. One Sergeant blamed senior management for reducing the role to burdensome administrative requirements:

> They haven't got a clue what Sergeants do on a daily basis. When they (senior management) come down it's: 'I want you to do this. Why aren't you doing that?' Then it's: 'You should be doing the core Sergeant role'. I'm listening on the radio and allocating jobs so it seems naïve for a Superintendent to say 'this needs doing'. You created the role so you can't turn around and say it doesn't need doing today [. . .] It's just straight in there and relentless. I'm resilient and I play the game, but that demoralises me to the point where I think 'why should I bother?' And that's the culture. Blame all rather than identify the problem. (Observation field notes)

Several staff claimed to be essentially unsupervised. Most of the officers' working day required actions and decisions that were not subject to auditable process beyond very brief updates to the radio communicator. Dealing with general incidents, which in this district were predominantly incidents where there was serious threat to life of the public, were internalised affairs, rarely clearly disclosed and sometimes secretive in nature.

New auditable processes are meant to 'shed some light on the low-visibility recess of policing by requiring officers to account for and measure certain of their activities' (Rowe, 2007: 280). In Eastside, this process was highly selective. Prioritised activities, in particular around vulnerability issues, required significantly more detailed paperwork procedures and were afforded more accountability and scrutiny. But daily, key encounters with the public often went under the radar of management and fell beyond the scope of auditable requirements. It was in this sphere of work – not specifical part of 'vulnerability' and therefore not a priority in 're-professionalised' policing – where professional competence was often lacking and where safeguarding the public was often compromised.

In keeping with the experience of all forces in England and Wales (Millie, 2014), the prioritisation of Eastside's policing work was affected by austerity measures. Eastside endured close to a 25% cut in police officer numbers between 2010 and the start of the observation fieldwork (2017) (Home Office, 2022). Fieldwork observations indicated that on most shifts there were no more than 5–8 officers available at any one time to respond to calls and incidents in a busy town centre district. Officers reflected that this was a significant reduction from previous years. At the end of the second observational shift the researcher noted:

> The overriding mood of the staff is resignation that they haven't got enough resources and therefore cannot do the job to the best of their ability. The Inspector and Sergeants feel overwhelmed by the volume of incidents. One Sergeant said that recently, as most of his officers had made arrests, it left him and a PC to cover the entire city centre. They went to twenty-nine jobs and had to 'bin them all off' as there was 'nothing else we could do. We couldn't get tied down with anything just in case there was a serious incident'. (Observation field-notes)

Alongside resource shortages, many officers claimed that the standards of investigative skills had also slipped badly in recent years. Investigations start, in most cases, at the scene of incidents. If incident management is poor this can compromise the quality of evidence. For example, while observing a patrol two accompanying officers were called to the scene of a male (rough sleeper) found deceased in a tent. Eight officers (including two Sergeants), four rough sleepers (and two pet dogs) spent over 40 minutes chatting and walking around a taped-off declared scene of crime (taped-off, it should be said, 20 minutes after arrival on scene), with no obvious knowledge expressed or shown as regards the potential contamination of crime scenes. The death was eventually downgraded from being potentially suspicious, but evidence from that scene would have been compromised had it become a murder or manslaughter case. Commenting on the quality of primary investigations (the initial investigation at the scene of a crime) an officer said:

> It's very, very poor. The worst I've seen in my career. Just in terms of statements, what should go into statements evidence-wise is so poor. Some officers totally miss out what the offence is, the points to prove, and will basically miss all relevant evidence in a statement. Now you just get a generalised narrative of what happens, no evidence. Officers discuss file training and a process that initially worked well, but now they get no support from senior leadership team managers who are more concerned about vulnerable adults and safeguarding. (Interview number 23)

Deskilling officers in investigative skills while upskilling them in the process required to deal with specific types of victim creates a paradoxical situation where officers are equipped to identify and safeguard vulnerable victims but in a way that could potentially compromise the chances of bringing perpetrators to justice. For example, at the scene of a domestic incident an officer, young in service and being mentored by an experienced officer, spent over an hour and a half taking a statement from the victim and a further hour updating various databases back at the station. The researcher noted:

> I have no doubt that the statement was of a good quality and the officer covered all twenty-seven points displayed on the tablet used to take the statement. Every facet of the domestic violence process was covered meticulously and the mentor praised the officer. If this incident was highlighted by HMICFRS in future it would probably be graded 'excellent'. However, the perpetrator, a violent man recently released from prison for a similar offence on the same woman, was still at large. The officers made no attempt, except by asking one question, 'do you know where he lives?' which received a negative reply, to locate and arrest him. It was as if completing the process was more important than getting this man off the streets, thus protecting the victim from immediate harm. The proactive thought and significance of doing that was not in their mindset. (Observation field-notes)

Interview data provided several examples of criminal cases, including serious vulnerability cases, that had been compromised by poor primary investigations (either dropped with 'no further action' or lost at court due to insufficient or poor evidence).

The consequences of deskilling in key areas question the professional legitimacy of the police in the eyes of officers and the public they serve. Competency, the acquisition of knowledge and its effective use in a practical domain, play important roles in creating

public trust (Fournier, 1999: 286). Officers' general views were that the service they provided to the public was poor across all areas of policing, partly due to austerity and staff cuts, but significantly due to changes in practice and subsequent deskilling, loss of autonomy and unintended consequences of a prescriptive process that cannot fully capture the complexity or 'reality' of actual incidents and invites risk-averse actions.

Officers questioned the legal legitimacy of their own and others' actions. An Inspector commented on the large increase of prisoners (often both the perpetrator and victim) detained for domestic violence offences who are then released from police custody (on average in Eastside after 16 hours in custody) with no further action taken. Custody Officers were similarly concerned with the processes of detaining people claiming mental health issues. Often, they were held for hours beyond the time they should have been legally released (under PACE)[7] simply because they were waiting for a police doctor to provide a custody exit risk assessment – a process that predominantly involved actions that could have been taken by officers, such as taking the person home to a friend or relative or advice about health support groups. This is the ultimate irony of the re-professionalisation programme. Its flawed operationalisation is not only challenging for officers as members of a uniformed occupation, but also often creates negative consequences for the public (vulnerable or otherwise) that the 'professional' police service was designed to serve.

Discussion

A multifaceted, centralised attempt to 're-professionalise' policing in England and Wales has been ongoing in the past decade. Government policy has reshaped the structural governance of policing and reformed its leadership, knowledge base, educational framework, management and strategic direction, partly to address well-publicised instances of historical malpractice and partly to tackle changing societal demands and new technological challenges (Holdaway, 2017; Martin, 2021; Rowe and Rowe, 2021). The internalised dominance and power previously held by Chief Constables and senior officers maintained a strong occupational culture that dictated practice based on a blue-collar, 'occupational closure' model of 'practical professionalism', featuring self-regulation and discretion-based experiential and craft knowledge. A new, more accountable, externalised governance structure has enacted change through a formalised re-professionalisation programme which attempts to emulate many of the traits of a modern, general, white-collar profession, including training in HE institutions, and the establishment of an arms-length professional body providing accreditation and setting behavioural standards and competencies (Charman, 2017; Holdaway, 2017; Lumsden, 2017).

Well-documented problems have haunted policing in the United Kingdom for decades, and there are good reasons why operational and cultural change were sought under the broad umbrella of 're-professionalisation'. A professionalisation project could be a sensible and effective way to upskill officers and enhance their status and standards. Vulnerability and harm reduction are rightly more of a priority than they once were. Moving from police training to HE could be a valuable and worthwhile enterprise. But the coercive ways in which this 'new professionalism' (Evetts, 2011) has been imposed on police organisations has been very problematic. It has sought to delete the

occupational closure model and reformat traditional notions of police professionalism. The new professionalism in policing is, at heart, a managerialist control mechanism that is changing policing practice through the enactment of a generalist, harm-reduction and vulnerability model. Seen through the lens of street-level operational officers, this new way of working is beset with problems and limitations.

We fully recognise the rationale for change in the form of upskilling officers to capably identify, assess and safeguard those most vulnerable in society. We also recognise the deep limitations and drawbacks of carceral and punitive approaches to 'crime hot spots', 'broken windows' and 'zero-tolerance' policing (Aliverti, 2020; Harcourt, 2002; Mason, 2020). However, our evidence demonstrates (at Eastside, at least) that the top-down, management-driven assertion of the re-professionalisation project has created paralysis in policing, characterised by a disturbing loss of meaningful functionality and productivity. The daily role of the police is transformed. Dealing with vulnerability, both on the streets and in custody, dominates officers' working days. It is expedited through prescriptive, risk-averse, auditable procedures that command and commend a tick-box mentality, ignore unmeasurable tasks and discourage proactivity (Heslop, 2011). Officers in Eastside essentially 'work to rule', taking unwarranted and, in the opinion of many, unnecessary and unjust actions in the shadow of failure, criticism and potential disciplinary action. Yet paradoxically, beyond auditable work is the time-consuming and procedurally vague role of the police as 'social intervention officers', carried out in a vacuum created by cuts to health, social and emergency services and through the police prioritisation mantra of 'threat, harm and risk'. Daily shifts are dominated by 'vulnerability work', viewed by officers as time-consuming and which often fail to show tangible, beneficial outcomes for the public and, ironically, vulnerable people and victims of crime.

New audit processes represent a powerful assertion of managerial control over the police profession, explicitly aiming to frame and determine what officers do and how they do it, while also establishing adherence with these new procedures as markers of successful, modernised, 'professional' officers and forces. Given this new assertion of centralised control, altered priorities and measurable audit, the logics of the 'new professionalism' (Evetts, 2011) or 're-professionalisation' (Holdaway, 2017) are often indistinguishable from those of 'managerialism'; namely performance management, standardisation, scrutiny, and a powerful reassertion of managerial authority over operator discretion and organisational strategy (Cockcroft, 2013; Klikauer, 2013; Leicht, 2016; Reed, 2018). It would be wrong, however, to assert that additional external scrutiny and managerial control always results in a frictionless transformation of the professions that it seeks to control, change and audit. It is widely acknowledged that most police work – like many forms of work in public service professions (Lipsky, 2010; Zacka, 2017), is unseen or unaccounted for by supervisory oversight or data input requirements and quite difficult to monitor and audit (Reiner, 2010; Rowe, 2007).

Officers regarded the new police professionalism as clearly controlled and directed from the top. Eastside prioritises HMICFRS, Home Office and CoP directives and inspection requirements. Police forces are graded in league tables based on inspection competencies – the public face of managerial control. In Eastside this narrow view and context of policing has unexpected and unforeseen outcomes. Audits, league tables and crime figures provide a superficial picture prone to self-justification and gaming (Bevan

and Hood, 2006; Hood, 2006). Beneath this surface, our exploration of daily practice at Eastside uncovered a concerning degree of deskilling; there were problems managing essential tasks and functions that remain largely invisible to the organisation and public, or were not subject to audit, inspection or prioritisation. Many aspects of occupational craft, emphasised as an essential tool of professionals or street-level bureaucrats (Evans, 2016; Lipsky, 2010), were either limited in their application, neglected or discarded. The consequences of such a loss of skills (once encouraged, supervised and passed from officer to officer), were potentially grave, up to and including the compromising of public safety at the scene of serious incidents and compromising the quality of potential prosecutions and the criminal justice process. At times, the outcomes of risk-averse policies and actions potentially breached the human rights of a significant number of people detained and incarcerated. Strategy, policy and actions intended to 'professionalise' a workforce, change its culture and safeguard the public were, in many cases, actually *increasing* public danger and limiting police ability to safeguard the vulnerable and to reduce social harm.

Conclusion

The imposition of professionalism from above, rather than its cultivation from within, can have baleful consequences. In our policing research, such limitations are illuminated by our examination of key factors in the operationalisation of professionalism (Fournier, 1999). Strong links between the main actors at an institutional level dominated and formalised change without recognition of the significance of informal knowledge and craft practice. Checklists and protocols were lengthy yet often inadequate in capturing the complex grey areas of street-level interaction. Large parts of police practice were barely scrutinised at all, exposing the potential limitations of managerialised procedures that are set as organisational priorities as a way of satisficing particular audit regimes. Problems born of a lack of knowledge and unmonitored street-level scrutiny of practice went unchecked in the routinised, daily work of officers based around management-driven priorities and process.

From the perspectives of police officers, the intended outcomes and benefits of the re-professionalisation of policing have not materialised. While notions of a 'core police role' involving proactive policing and obtaining justice for victims have often been romanticised by police officers whose actual duties rarely correspond to that image (Bittner, 1990; Mille, 2014; Punch, 1979), the evidence presented in this article indicate that 'the core police role' and 'traditional police craft' have been reformed almost out of existence. Officers see few benefits in the re-professionalisation project, feeling forced to change the way they work for self-preservation and not necessarily for the benefit of the public. Many feel detached from the aims of their superiors and the imposed methods of transformation, resenting the dismantling of traditional ways of working. Wholesale devaluation of traditional skillsets in favour of siloed, process-based tasks and auditable processes is counterproductive to autonomous thinking, proactivity, creativity and the general capability required by occupational professionals to provide a meaningful, localised service to the communities they serve (Williams et al., 2019). Such assets of occupational practice are not inclusively measurable or visible.

While our focus in this article has necessarily been on how re-professionalisation raises questions about the purpose of the police and the essential nature and priorities of police work, it is worth pondering that such reforms in England have been developed arguably without any significant dialogue or engagement with the general public. Indeed, as noted in a recent House of Commons briefing, public engagement with and understanding of Police and Crime Commissioners across England has been limited (Brown, 2021). Discussions around the re-professionalisation project have tended to be self-referential and overly focused on high-level policy and 'evidence-based' prescriptions (Stanko and Dawson, 2016). But everyday police work takes place in neighbourhoods and on the street through individual encounters between practitioners and clients (Lipsky, 2010; Zacka, 2017). Disconnects between formal and practical, and senior and local levels are growing. 'Professionalism' is in danger of being recast to mean 'compliance with imposed standards', while discretion, craft and experiential learning are progressively degraded (Evetts, 2011; Williams et al., 2019). NPM-infused professionalisation programmes directed from above as a means of ridding a workforce of unwanted occupational traits and controlling future standards and practice can, if mismanaged, lead to confusion, paralysis and disengagement and a breakdown of the practitioner-client relationship, with serious unintended consequences for a profession and the public it tries to serve.

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ORCID iDs

Bill Hebenton https://orcid.org/0000-0002-7347-3824

Leo McCann https://orcid.org/0000-0002-0754-804X

Notes

1. To remove/detain a person without warrant under Section 136 of the Mental Health Act 1983.
2. National Crime Recording Standard – a set of institutional procedures designed to standardise how incidents are formally recorded by police forces and officers as crimes. Introduced in 2002, the system is supposedly 'victim-based'; a major rationale for its introduction being an attempt to limit the practices whereby police downgrade crimes as less serious incidents. Its effects on 'making the victim count', however, have been questionable, with a highly critical HMIC report in 2014 (HMIC, 2014) claiming that around 800,000 crimes per year reported to the police went unrecorded – an estimated 19% of total crimes.
3. Criminal Investigation Department.
4. Domestic Violence.
5. Accident and Emergency – A hospital Emergency Department.

6. 'DASH' is the Domestic Abuse, Stalking and Honour-based violence risk assessment tool in wide usage in England and Wales. '1–27' is a reference to the questions on this instrument.
7. Police and Criminal Evidence Act, a wide-ranging law introduced in 1984, that contains detailed provisions about the treatment of those detained in police custody.

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Author biographies

Cliff Bacon is a Lecturer in Criminology at the University of Salford. He was a police officer for 30 years. He completed his PhD at the University of Manchester in 2020 on the subject of professionalisation in public organisations. Cliff teaches in the areas of criminal justice and police practice.

Bill Hebenton has researched and published widely on police, criminal justice and, more recently, on comparative criminology in Greater China. He co-edits *Palgrave Advances in Criminology and Criminal Justice in Asia* book series and is Honorary Associate Professor in the Department of Criminology at the University of Manchester, U.K.

Leo McCann is Professor of Management at the University of York. His teaching and research focuses on organisations and professions, especially in uniformed settings. He is the author of *The Paramedic at Work: A Sociology of a New Profession* (Oxford University Press).