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Police innovation and institutional entrepreneurs: the emergence of police drug diversion schemes in England and Wales

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ABSTRACT

This article advances knowledge about the initiation of police innovation in the context of drugs policing. Drawing on the findings of a qualitative research project, it provides an original account of the emergence of police drug diversion schemes in England and Wales by analysing the complex interactions between individual, organisational and environmental determinants. The concept of institutional entrepreneurship is applied to examine the role of diversion entrepreneurs in the innovation process. These are the key police actors behind local schemes who had an interest in changing the institutional status quo. Diversion entrepreneurs wove together various forms of knowledge to frame problems and persuade stakeholders that diversion would address policing priorities and reduce demand by reducing reoffending and the resources needed to deal with people caught committing minor drug-related offences. Police budget cuts had created fertile ground for diversion as police organisations were leaning towards more proactive styles of policing which focus on prevention by addressing the underlying causes of crime. Making the case for diversion also required diversion entrepreneurs to highlight the shortcomings of existing practices and present diversion as a viable alternative to traditional enforcement interventions that seek to tackle drug problems through criminal sanctions. This involved interpretive struggles over the police role and managing perceptions of risk. It is argued that police scholars should pay closer attention to institutional entrepreneurship within police organisations to enhance understanding of processes of innovation and cultural change.

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Introduction

Given that controversy, crisis and reform are permanent fixtures on the police agenda (Bradford *et al.* 2024), innovation is important because it can lead to improvements in policing and enable police organisations to respond to changing demands and pressures. ‘Innovation’ generally involves the development and adoption of ‘new practices that amount to a discontinuity with the past’ (De Vries *et al.* 2018, p. 159). While the field is replete with old wine in new bottles, policing is a frequent target of new ideas and the police regularly experiment with new approaches. Bullock *et al.* (2022, p. 397) state that the history of policing is ‘filled with innovation’. The Police Foundation’s *Strategic Review of Policing* found ‘plenty of examples of police forces running with an idea and achieving real results,

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whether that be in terms of new technological solutions or trialling evidence-based ways to reducing crime' (Muir *et al.* 2022, p. 129). It is therefore surprising that innovation has not been a central concern of most police scholars.

One of the earliest studies of police innovation is Weatheritt's (1986) review of patrol and crime prevention initiatives. At the time of writing, Weatheritt observed that a notable feature of the literature on innovations in policing 'is how little it has to say about change as a process'. As a result, 'very little is known about the conditions which favour successful innovation and those which hinder it' (p. 118). Interest in police innovation has grown over the intervening decades, predominantly in the United States (Willis and Mastrofski 2011, Weisburd and Braga 2019a). Examples of innovative approaches to policing that have garnered significant attention include community policing, evidence-based policing, predictive policing, problem-oriented policing, and procedural justice policing. A small amount of empirical research has considered determinants influencing the adoption of innovations, implementation processes, and diffusion across police organisations (see e.g. Skogan and Hartnett (2005) on information technology; Morabito (2010) on community policing; Bullock *et al.* (2022) on problem-oriented policing).

This article contributes to this body of literature by advancing knowledge about the initiation of police innovation in the context of drugs policing. The innovation in question is the new wave of police drug diversion (PDD) in England and Wales (Bacon 2024). Recent years have seen the emergence of police-led schemes that are designed to divert people caught committing minor (drug) offences away from the criminal justice system and into support services. These diversion schemes are local initiatives that have been internally driven by the police rather than externally imposed on the police by central government. Prominent examples include Avon and Somerset's *Drug Education Programme* (de Viggiani 2022), Durham's *Checkpoint* (Weir *et al.* 2022), Thames Valley's *Drug Diversion Pilot* (Spyt and Kew 2023), and the West Midlands' *DIVERT* (Jones and Twomey 2023).

PDD schemes are identified here as innovative initiatives that are designed to reform aspects of (drugs) policing. From the outset, therefore, it is necessary to explain why PDD should be viewed as an example of police innovation. Applying Moore *et al.*'s (1997) typology of innovations in policing, PDD constitutes a combination of 'programmatic' and 'strategic' innovation. Police-led schemes that divert people into educational, therapeutic or social services as an alternative to criminalisation are examples of programmatic innovation because they establish new operational methods of using police resources to deal with people suspected of either simple possession or an offence related to their drug use. The new wave of PDD is also a strategic innovation as it reframes drug problems and changes some of the basic understandings about the ends and means of drugs policing. PDD is a form of harm reduction policing which represents a significant departure from traditional enforcement interventions that seek to tackle minor drug offences and drug-related crimes through criminal sanctions (Bacon 2022, 2024, Bacon and Spicer 2023).¹

To date, extant research on the new wave of PDD has been principally concerned with evaluating implementation and outcomes (Lynch-Huggins *et al.* 2021, de Viggiani 2022, Warburton 2022, Weir *et al.* 2022, Spyt and Kew 2023). Bacon (2024) considers multiple schemes to examine police perspectives on diversion, the rationales behind its various forms, and the problems it is intended to resolve. What has yet to be the subject of scholarly attention is the innovation process. This article draws on the findings of a qualitative research project to provide an original account of the emergence of PDD by analysing the individual, organisational and environmental determinants that influenced the adoption of specific schemes in numerous police forces. In doing so, it addresses broader questions of why and how innovations occur in police organisations. The analysis concentrates on the initiation stage of the innovation process, the knowledge development, persuasion and planning activities, leading up to the decision to adopt (Rogers 2003).²

Taking inspiration from research on 'institutional entrepreneurship', my focus is on the role of 'diversion entrepreneurs', the key police actors behind the initiation of local PDD schemes. Institutional entrepreneurship refers to the 'activities of actors who have an interest in particular institutional arrangements and who leverage resources to create new institutions or to transform

existing ones' (Maguire *et al.* 2004, p. 657). While researchers have studied innovation through the lens of institutional entrepreneurship in a host of organisational fields (Hardy and Maguire 2008, Batilana *et al.* 2009), such as health care systems, law firms and software manufacturers, the concept has not been used to account for innovations in policing.

Regarding structure, the following section reviews key explanations for the emergence of police innovations, starting with the 'technical/rational' perspective (Willis and Mastrofski 2011), before moving on to consider multi-level determinants and the central role of institutional entrepreneurs. Next, after an overview of the methodology, case studies of diversion entrepreneurs provide readers with a rare insight into the ways and means of the innovation process. Having zoomed in on individual determinants of PDD, the article then turns its attention to drivers, facilitators and barriers at the organisational and environmental levels. Findings reveal how diversion entrepreneurs wove together various forms of knowledge to frame problems and persuade stakeholders that diversion would address policing priorities and reduce demand by reducing reoffending and the resources needed to deal with people caught committing minor drug-related offences. Police budget cuts had created fertile ground for diversion as the police organisations under study were leaning towards more proactive styles of policing which focus on prevention by addressing the underlying causes of crime. Making the case for diversion also required diversion entrepreneurs to highlight the shortcomings of existing practices and challenge the institutional status quo. This involved interpretive struggles over the police role and managing perceptions of risk. It is argued that police scholars should pay closer attention to institutional entrepreneurship within police organisations to enhance understanding of processes of innovation and cultural change.

The emergence of police innovations

The 'technical/rational' perspective

Theoretically, Willis and Mastrofski (2011, pp. 317–318) suggest that the 'technical/rational' perspective is the dominant explanation for the emergence of innovations in police organisations. This perspective essentially takes a problem-solution approach to innovation whereby police adopt practices that are best suited to achieving their desired outcomes.

Weisburd and Braga's (2019b) understanding of police innovation is a good illustration of the technical/rational perspective. The authors view police innovations as 'a response to a common set of problems' (p. 2). Taking a macro approach, they demonstrate how major innovations in American policing that began to emerge during the last decades of the twentieth century – notably community policing, broken windows policing, and problem-oriented policing – were brought about by a series of challenges to existing practices. Drawing on Rogers' (2003) diffusion of innovations theory, they argue that challenges to police effectiveness, rising crime rates, and concerns about the legitimacy of police actions created a perceived need for change. This is why police organisations started to adopt new approaches that moved away from standard policing models characterised by routine patrol, rapid response to calls for service, and follow-up investigations.

Another example of the technical/rational perspective that is of direct relevance to the new wave of PDD is Neyroud's (2022) case study of the testing and diffusion of police-led diversion. Reflecting on his personal involvement as both police professional and academic, he argues that recent interest in the UK has been driven by concerns about the effectiveness and costs of formal criminal justice processes and growing evidence of the potential benefits of pre-court models. Police engagement with the increasingly systematic body of research is put forward as the key reason for the widespread adoption of diversion.

The technical/rational perspective is logical and useful for explaining why the police adopt innovative practices. However, it paints an over-simplistic picture of the innovation process, reveals little about how innovations emerge, or the range of factors that impact decision-making. Researchers have repeatedly found that police decisions about whether to adopt a particular innovation are largely influenced by 'police attitudes (often entrenched) towards the need for and perceived

purpose of change' (Weatheritt 1986, p. 7). Despite the ample body of case studies, experiments and systematic reviews demonstrating that problem-oriented policing is associated with reductions in crime and public safety concerns, Bullock *et al.* (2022) found that incompatibility with prevailing police norms and values has impacted implementation. With regard to drugs policing, Ritter and Lancaster (2013) demonstrate that the problem of implementing effective, evidence-based practices is less about the dissemination or translation of evidence and more to do with the nature of the policy process, including the influence of powerful actors, political imperatives, and the ways in which issues are framed. Accordingly, researchers need a more sophisticated theoretical toolkit to examine and make sense of the multifaceted determinants of innovations in policing.

Institutional entrepreneurship

Given the sheer volume of empirical research, literature on innovation in the public and private sectors offers extensive and valuable knowledge on the contexts and mechanisms that impact innovation processes. To explain why and how innovations happen, this vast field of study indicates that it is necessary to consider the complex interactions between determinants at the individual, organisational and environmental levels (De Vries *et al.* 2016, 2018). At the individual level, determinants identified in De Vries *et al.*'s (2016) systematic review of public sector innovations include employee autonomy (empowerment), organisational position, and job-related knowledge and skills. Organisational determinants reflect the structural and cultural features of an organisation and include 'slack' resources (e.g. time, money), leadership styles, degree of risk aversion, and conflicts. Environmental determinants include external pressures (e.g. media attention, political/public demands), regulation, and participation in networks and inter-organisational relationships. Innovation characteristics, notably ease of use, relative advantage, compatibility and trialability, should also be considered as potential drivers, facilitators and/or barriers.

Studies of innovations in policing have tended to overlook or downplay the role of key police actors, focusing instead on the influence of organisational and environmental determinants. Weatheritt (1986) dedicates a couple of pages to a community crime prevention initiative that was brought about through 'the efforts of a few pioneering and entrepreneurial individuals' (p. 74). Neyroud (2022) notes that police-led diversion has long been reliant on individual innovators and advocates but does not elaborate or provide evidence to support this assertion. Willis and Mastrofski (2011) briefly mention the significant role of 'institutional entrepreneurs' in their review of innovation research. These individuals are typically in management positions and take on 'the difficult task of changing taken-for-granted cultural beliefs and values to help ensure that the innovation is perceived as legitimate inside and outside of the organisation' (p. 325). Yet, despite being central to understanding the complexities and dynamics of organisational innovation, institutional entrepreneurship has not been examined by researchers in the field of police studies. At this juncture it will be of value to unpack the concept in more detail.

An outcome of the 'agentic turn' in institutional theory (Abdelnour *et al.* 2017), the concept of institutional entrepreneurship is most closely associated with DiMaggio (1988, p. 14), who submitted that 'new institutions arise when organized actors with sufficient resources ... see in them an opportunity to realize interests that they value highly'. Institutional entrepreneurship was introduced to institutional analysis to explain how actors can contribute to changing institutions, despite pressures towards stasis. Based on a review of the literature, Battilana *et al.* (2009) argue that what distinguishes institutional entrepreneurs from other change agents is that the changes they initiate diverge from the institutional status quo in the field of activity.

My thinking on this topic has been heavily influenced by Maguire *et al.*'s (2004) examination of the dynamics of institutional entrepreneurship in emerging fields. Drawing on a qualitative study of HIV/AIDS treatment advocacy in Canada, the authors provide a nuanced account of activities of institutional entrepreneurs that highlights the importance of their subject positions and strategies for theorising and institutionalising the new practices they are promoting. Regarding 'subject positions' –

which include formal, bureaucratic roles as well as socially constructed and legitimated identities – institutional entrepreneurs tend to occupy positions that have wide legitimacy and bridge stakeholders to access dispersed sets of resources. Key components of ‘theorisation’ are framing problems and justifying innovation. Maguire *et al.* found that institutional entrepreneurs assemble an array of arguments that resonate with the interests of diverse stakeholders and develop stable coalitions through political means to create a broad base of support. For institutionalisation to occur, new practices must be linked to existing organisational routines and aligned with stakeholder values.

Scholarship in this vein generally focuses on the attributes and activities of actors who leverage resources to influence their institutional contexts. In their synthesis of the literature, Hardy and Maguire (2008) suggest that, while empirical studies have found that individual institutional entrepreneurs can play highly influential roles in episodes of change, especially powerful actors in dominant positions in mature fields, researchers might want to err on the side of caution when attributing agency or causality to specific actors and instead uncover the ‘collective, incremental and multi-level elements of institutional entrepreneurship as a process’ (p. 198). Their review gives emphasis to the role of ‘interpretive struggles’ over meaning in the emergence of innovation as actors draw on different discourses and find new ways to frame and rationalise change. It also stresses the importance of field conditions that provide a context in which ideas for change can emerge and take hold.³

Methodology

This article is based on data collected during a qualitative study of challenges, innovation and reform in drugs policing. The focus of this research was on PDD and other harm reduction measures at the interface between law enforcement and public health. Initially, to identify examples of diversion across England and Wales, I examined a range of policy documents, including HM Government’s (2017) drug strategy, the National Police Chiefs’ Council (NPCC) (2017) strategy on charging and out-of-court disposals, and Police and Crime Plans for all service areas. Police websites, news media sources, and information requests via professional networks were also included in this search and mapping exercise. While there are no guarantees that it generated a complete list of diversion schemes that were in operation, being piloted or on the strategic agenda, literature published since the research commenced confirms that the coverage was comprehensive (Shaw *et al.* 2022, Home Affairs Committee 2023).

Fieldwork was undertaken across different regions of England and Wales between May 2018 and October 2019. The main strand of the methodology comprised 81 semi-structured interviews. Most took place in Avon and Somerset (n = 16), Cleveland (n = 8), Cumbria (n = 7), Durham (n = 8), London (n = 17), Thames Valley (n = 13) and the West Midlands (n = 6), though interviews were also carried out in Derbyshire (n = 1), North Wales (n = 1), South Yorkshire (n = 2) and West Mercia (n = 2). Documents, both publicly available and internal, were collected and analysed to inform interview design and provide additional insights into the innovation process. These included business cases, briefings, evaluation reports, and press releases.

Interviews were designed to enhance ‘information power’ through sample specificity and high-quality dialogue (Malterud *et al.* 2016). My primary goal was to interview the key police actors behind the development and implementation of various diversion schemes to find out why and how this trend in drugs policing was happening. Purposive sampling was used to select interviewees based on their role in the innovation process, followed by a process of snowballing. Police participants varied between initiatives, spanned the ranks, and worked across a wide range of roles (police officers/staff n = 46/3). Police and Crime Commissioners (PCCs) and their teams were included in the sample (n = 13), given their role in police governance, which has enabled some to lead local change by becoming drug policy actors (Jones and Twomey 2023). To gain a national perspective, interviews were carried out with the present and former NPCC lead for drugs and the Association of Police and Crime Commissioners (APCC) lead for alcohol and substance misuse (n = 3). Finally, as diversion schemes are multi-agency initiatives, it was imperative that the research captured

partner perspectives. Partners included drug treatment services, local authorities, and probation ($n = 16$). All interviewees provided informed consent.

Following adaptive theory (Layder 1998), data were analysed thematically using codes derived through a hybrid process of deductive and inductive reasoning. Sensitising concepts were developed by reviewing existing literature and policy documents. Primacy was then given to generating analytical insights from the data. Institutional entrepreneurship emerged as a key theme during data analysis, as it became apparent that the new wave of PDD was being driven from within police organisations by embedded actors who wanted to bring about divergent change. Data was iteratively coded and thereby codes were refined as the research progressed. Relevant codes for this article included autonomy/empowerment, field conditions/organisational and environmental determinants; interest/motivation, interpretive struggle, knowledge/skills, organisational/subject position, resources, and theorisation (framing problems/justifying diversion).

The remainder of this article explores what the interviews and documents revealed about the complex interactions between determinants at the individual, organisational and environmental levels. This is done through case studies and an examination of the ways in which diversion entrepreneurs framed problems to justify diversion. In presenting their words below, for ethical reasons, I have ascribed each participant with an anonymous unique identifier. Police service areas are likewise not identified in the findings to protect confidentiality.⁴

Findings

Diversion entrepreneurs

While none of the diversion schemes were brought into being by a single person, interviewees consistently identified an individual, small group or team, as the driving force behind the innovation process. Reflecting on schemes operating in several police service areas, the following senior officer, who was national lead for drugs, described them as:

[I]ndividual driven initiatives where individuals ... have got experience, are experiencing the issues that drugs is creating, whether it be an individual case, an ongoing series of cases or repeat demand, and therefore recognising they need to do something different. (Police_Officer#3K)

This article refers to these people as diversion entrepreneurs and shines a light on their important role in initiating the new wave of PDD. As it is not possible to provide detailed biographies of every diversion entrepreneur I came across during fieldwork, or origin stories of their respective innovations, this section provides an account of key police actors behind a few of the schemes. The case studies were selected to draw attention to significant commonalities and nuances in institutional entrepreneurship and the individual determinants of police innovation. They demonstrate that innovation is an unpredictable, dynamic and iterative process (Rogers 2003, Willis and Mastrofski 2011).

The diversion entrepreneurs depicted below were principally motivated by experience and had a fervent interest in changing the institutional status quo. Their reasons for pursuing change were benevolent and not career progression. They had amassed craft knowledge and acquired a deep understanding about drug problems, policing and diversion through a combination of everyday police work, impactful events, engagement with stakeholders, and, to a lesser extent, research. Individuals who spearheaded diversion were in 'subject positions' (Maguire *et al.* 2004) that gave them autonomy, legitimacy and resource capability. To develop the schemes, however, they needed to collaborate with likeminded colleagues with applicable skillsets, liaise with partners with relevant expertise, and secure buy-in from chief officers.

Case study one

Howard was identified by interviewees as the driving force behind drug diversion in his organisation. He was described as an 'internal activist' by colleagues. One member of the senior command team

said 'he's an evangelist when it comes to the issue of drugs' (Police_Officer#3H). Another said that any traction the police force has got on the issue of diversion is because Howard has 'been agitating' (Police_Officer#6H).

Like many officers, Howard spent the early years of his policing career vigorously enforcing drug laws against people who use drugs:

I was nicking about three people a day for possession, I was prolific ... always had the highest arrest rate, the highest positive outcome disposal rate, the highest stop/search rate ... I was good in what policing wanted at that time. (Police_Officer#1H)

The impact Howard was having on their clients prompted a local treatment service to organise a meeting whereat they sought to educate him about addiction, harm reduction and recovery. 'It opened my eyes'. Next came immersion into drug markets through stints as an undercover officer and a member of a major crime investigation team. The catalyst for the drug diversion scheme, however, was an enquiry about a young woman who died from a heroin overdose. 'Her family really impacted me because they resonated with everything I was'. This experience acted as a 'turning point' (Bacon 2022), made Howard question the purpose of arresting people for possession, challenge the stigma attached to addiction, and ask what more the police can do to help save lives. 'I have got a position now where I can start to influence change'.

At the initiation stage of the innovation process, Howard was an inspector in the CID, a middle-management position with responsibilities for frontline investigators and their operational activities. Despite not having a leadership role that related to drug policy, he 'started researching the subject and then questioning our current approach and whether we have added value' (Police_Officer#3H). A 'platform of support' (Police_Officer#6H) from his line manager and senior officers was essential for allowing the idea for a diversion scheme to take root and grow. 'There's a thriving atmosphere of, you know, welcoming innovation within our force'. Feeling empowered, Howard went on a 'journey' to gain knowledge about drug policy and viable models of diversion. This involved a great deal of networking and debating with stakeholders. Knowledge from other forces where PDD schemes had already been implemented was highly valued as it provided templates, evidence of effectiveness, and guidance on how to navigate the innovation process:

We have taken best practice from Durham's *Checkpoint*, the pioneers, and Bristol *DEP* ... We have taken that learning and implemented within our own vision.

Meetings with various national bodies were useful for finding out what was legally and politically feasible, making connections and getting 'top-level support'. These included the Home Office, the Ministry of Justice, the NPCC, the APCC, and the All-Party Parliamentary Group for Drug Policy Reform.

The next stage of the process was to write a project proposal. 'Obviously not being an academic or anything like that I didn't know how to do it, so I had to seek help'. The chief constable decided to invest in the idea by allocating resources from the force's strategy unit to review the evidence and develop a research-informed business case. For the most part, these resources came in the form of Eryk, a detective sergeant with a doctorate, who partnered up with Howard to design, implement and evaluate the pilot.

Case study two

An architect of a pre-arrest diversion scheme in another force set it up shortly before retiring from a career in policing that spanned almost four decades. While much of Pete's service was spent tackling street drug use, local drug markets and the associated criminality, for the last ten years he was the force drug lead with responsibility for strategic policy. His motivation for taking on this role was the drug use of a family member:

[O]ne of my immediate family has become addicted to drugs, to hard drugs ... the impact of that on, not just her, but the rest of the family and particularly myself ... made me question a lot more around how we police drugs

and how we deal with them, which then led to me taking up the post as drugs lead ... because I thought maybe I could do something about it. (Police_Officer#5A)

Pete 'strongly believed' that it was time to decriminalise the possession of drugs. Ideally, this would be achieved through legislative change (Stevens *et al.* 2024), but as the government find this politically unpalatable – see e.g. HM Government (2010, p. 2, 2017, p. 17) – the next best option was to exercise discretion and develop a model of de facto decriminalisation. A further ambition was to 'try and educate' police officers to change the criminalisation mindset. Yet, while well positioned to make policy changes, he did not have the wherewithal to design a diversion scheme.

This situation changed when he met Zoe, a police constable from the force's problem-solving team. Tasked with developing an innovative response to crime and anti-social behaviour in a high demand neighbourhood, a cursory analysis identified drug use as an underlying problem. While undertaking research in the local community, interactions with people who use drugs, listening to their stories and observing their behaviours, started to change Zoe's views on drugs policing:

People with addiction ... are committing crime, they are creating a high demand for us, but by just arresting them and putting them into the criminal justice system, we are not actually getting any further forward. We need to be trying to look at the root cause of the problem. (Police_Officer#13A)

Zoe pitched her idea for a diversion scheme to Pete and they collaborated on a proposal. The initial concept was quickly put together by way of brainstorming discussions and a 'haphazard' approach to research:

Instead of going ahead with this on evidence from other schemes elsewhere, we went on gut instinct and with what I can only call casual reference to other schemes because all we did was look it up online ... We didn't have a team, so we couldn't do the analysis and research that we would have liked to have done. (Police_Officer#5A)

Partner agencies were consulted from this early stage of the innovation process. As drug lead, Pete was the police representative on the joint commissioning group for drug treatment and had a 'good relationship' with the local service providers:

I sort of laid it out, the principles of it, what do you think of this ... it developed from there, and then I just had individual meetings with the people I knew I had to have on side to make this work.

Pete acknowledged that input from partners was vital for the design of the scheme because police are 'not the experts' in diversion:

[Diversion scheme] was redesigned because initially it was developed with a kind of recovery focus, which is a complete mismatch with the population that are going to be coming through, who were largely not going to be drug dependent. (Partner_Agency#12A)

A key factor in getting the proposal approved by the force chief officer team was that Pete 'enjoyed a level of trust because of my age and experience in the job'. Another was that Pete had access to funding and was able to 'rely on my relationships with our partner agencies to get this off the ground at very little cost'.

Case study three

Jason was instrumental in establishing a post-arrest scheme that diverts young adults away from crime by supporting them into employment. By using police custody as a teachable moment, he wanted to raise awareness of adverse childhood experiences and change 'old school culture', the mindset that police work is solely about arresting people and 'banging them up'.

During interview, Jason identified a few key events that had shaped his thinking and prompted him 'to do something different'. Reflecting on his personal life, Jason said that his 'failure' to get a relative 'away from drug circles' could be an 'internal feeling' that underlies his passion for diversion. Great significance was attached to a chance encounter on public transport, when Jason overheard someone talking about early intervention approaches to violence, joined the conversation and was

given a report. 'If I hadn't read that report, I would not have seen the benefits of diversion'. Dealing with incidents of serious violence and witnessing the death of young people on the streets was another motivational factor:

I was working on him at the point where the [ambulance] turned up, he died, he just bled out ... [H]e was a well-known prominent gang member but at that time that he died, when he was looking at us and holding our hands, you know, he knew that he was going to die and I got the impression there that even though we were police ... his sort of enemy ... he was grateful we were there. (Police_Officer#1E)

Aside from a year in a specialist gang crime unit, Jason had spent the bulk of his service in response, neighbourhood policing and partnership roles. He was a custody inspector at the time of the research. The idea for the scheme was the culmination of Jason's experiences with 'trial and error' diversion, 'from learning about bits and pieces I had done as a sergeant and developing concepts there', such as referrals, hosting job fairs and setting up training opportunities. 'I had the framework in my head and I put it on one side of an A4 bit of paper'. Knowledge from other diversion schemes and academic research did not have much bearing on the initial design. 'I kept googling "diversion", kept on trying to do a bit of my own research and I couldn't find anything that was doing this sort of work'.

Rather than seeking advice or getting organisational approval at this stage in the innovation process, Jason had a 'just do it' mentality, launched the scheme and set about 'growing it from the ground up':

[W]hen you get to guvnor [inspector] you are in a position where you can start making things happen properly, whereas I think as a PC, sergeant, you need to trust your inspector to let it grow a little bit and not shut it down.

Working alone, however, with limited resources, he struggled to find suitable people to carry out interventions with detainees and to set up referral pathways with partner agencies. Michelle, a member of police staff from a minoritised ethnic group, who worked with Jason in the partnership office, noticed that he needed help and offered her support. Having lost a family member to drug-related violence, an experience that was not uncommon among her peer group, her motivation was to save lives by helping young people move away from crime:

I was working on [diversion scheme] alongside my disclosure role and I just played at it, if you like, if I had a bit of downtime, I would go into custody and I would talk to people because I like talking, I'm friendly and I like to help and, you know, it was my love and my passion and my drive for stopping another mother burying their kid. (Police_Staff#2E)

After a couple of months Jason believed they had a 'genuine proof of concept' and decided to inform his bosses. He needed force buy-in to develop the scheme, assign police volunteers and commission a third sector organisation, as well as 'top cover' from senior management because inspector is 'not a rank where I can literally roll up to anyone and say this is what we are doing'.

Framing problems and justifying diversion

Innovations in policing are 'a response to a common set of problems' (Weisburd and Braga 2019b, p. 2). To understand the emergence of PDD schemes, therefore, it is necessary to consider the problems that diversion is designed to address, or, to be more precise, the ways in which diversion entrepreneurs 'framed problems and justified the new practices they were promoting in ways that resonated with a variety of different stakeholders to create a broad base of support' (Maguire *et al.* 2004, p. 669). Having zoomed in on individual determinants of PDD in the previous section, in what follows the focus shifts to drivers, facilitators and barriers at the organisational and environmental levels (De Vries *et al.* 2016, 2018). Attention is given to the ways in which diversion entrepreneurs operated within their field conditions to persuade stakeholders that diversion would address policing priorities, reduce demand, and provide a viable alternative to traditional enforcement interventions that seek to tackle drug problems through criminal sanctions. While the diversion

entrepreneurs from the case studies remain at the heart of the analysis, data relating to actors in other police service areas is also drawn on to enhance generalisability and provide more insights into institutional entrepreneurship and police innovation.

Policing priorities

Within police organisations, it is expected that proposals for innovative initiatives will address policing priorities. Diversion entrepreneurs had to link their schemes to priority areas to help secure buy-in from senior management:

Obviously the bosses want to know how it improves things or reduces this, that and the other ... [Y]ou tie it in with key strategic drivers, what is important at the moment ... If safeguarding is the huge driver at the moment then link it to safeguarding ... If it's drugs, you do likewise. (Police_Officer#10E)

Justifying schemes using organisational priorities also helped diversion entrepreneurs legitimate PDD when they came up against conflict from colleagues:

I've had a big hand in my face ... going, I'm an ex-hostage negotiator, I'm a specialist firearms officer, I've been in the job for thirty years, why are we helping these people ... I think because I can say well [diversion scheme] actually does this, this and this to fit in with this policing objective, people then start seeing it differently. (Police_Officer#1E)

For the most part, organisational priorities were set out in force Control Strategies and PCC Police and Crime Plans.⁵ Some forces had drug strategies that outlined their approach to dealing with drugs. Various problems that could be addressed through diversion were identified as priorities. The most common priorities were 'tackling drug-related crime', 'tackling the supply of illegal drugs', and 'tackling harm caused to individuals and communities by drugs'. 'Keeping children and young people safe' and 'protecting the most vulnerable from harm' were also covered by the proposed goals of diversion.

The significance of drugs as a cross-cutting theme was highlighted by diversion entrepreneurs, especially in relation to organised crime, violence, and vulnerability, which were described as 'hot topics' in policing:

The conversation around drugs in some respects has become more hard hitting ... greater awareness of the links around serious organised crime, the 'county lines' agenda, more and more often the drugs trade is being linked with the increases in serious violence that we are seeing in the media, knife crime and young children on young children ... [T]here's also ... increased awareness of the vulnerability associated with some of this, so the child criminal exploitation being something that is becoming more and more of a focus of many agencies' work. (PCC#2I)

At a national level, diversion entrepreneurs sought to align their proposals with the government drug strategy and other pertinent policies (e.g. *Modern Crime Prevention Strategy* (Home Office 2016)). Government policies that were in place when the new wave of PDD was emerging contained very little about diversion and did not explicitly mention police-led schemes. Diversion entrepreneurs were thus required to make inferences and explain why PDD would achieve the government's ambitions. Regarding drug use, for example, HM Government (2010) committed to intervening early with young people and providing them with good quality education and advice. Making liaison and diversion services available in police custody suites and diverting vulnerable young people also featured in the strategy. In the subsequent strategy, HM Government (2017) stated that the criminal justice system 'should consider use of health-based, rehabilitative interventions to address the drivers behind crime and help prevent further substance misuse and offending' (p. 23).

A few diversion entrepreneurs framed PDD as a police response to the rise in drug-related deaths, a public health crisis that has gripped the UK since 2012 (Kimber *et al.* 2019):

The national statistics, the number of people who are dying is higher than ever so there's a strong moral case ... the sense of there is people dying on our patch, we could do something to stop them dying, shouldn't we do that. (Police_Officer#3H)

The need for ‘new action’ to respond to drug-related deaths was flagged by HM Government (2017, p. 5), but the issue was not a formal policing priority. Interviews revealed that police views were split on whether reducing drug-related deaths should be a policing priority as many officers felt it was a health problem that fell outside their sphere of responsibility. Diversion entrepreneurs had to engage in ‘interpretive struggles’ (Hardy and Maguire 2008) to make their case. They invoked the Peelian principles to point out that a foundational role of the police is to protect and preserve life. They argued that the marked increase in avoidable mortality falls squarely within police public health functions. They portrayed people who use drugs as a vulnerable group who are unable to protect themselves from harm. They told stories about people who had lost their lives to humanise the crisis and appeal to police compassion (Bacon 2022).

The setting of policing priorities by senior leaders in police organisations and central government is an attempt to limit the scope that officers have to use their judgement when deciding how to act (Stevens *et al.* 2025). In this sense, police innovation is constrained by these organisational and environmental determinants in that new initiatives must address priority areas. This section has shown, however, that policing priorities also acted as drivers and facilitators for the emergence of PDD schemes. Diversion entrepreneurs utilised various drug-related organisational priorities and government policies to frame problems and justify diversion.

Demand reduction

A problem identified by interviewees as crucial to the emergence of PDD was police budget cuts brought about by government austerity policies (Millie 2013, Caveney *et al.* 2020). Since 2010, the police service has been under pressure from the squeeze on public expenditure to reconsider their priorities and decide how best to deliver policing with fewer resources. This environmental determinant has resulted in a demand and capacity imbalance which has prompted police forces to rethink existing practices to find ways of reducing demand (Laufs *et al.* 2021). Against this backdrop, there was widespread recognition that traditional approaches to drugs policing must change because ‘the demand on the police from drug-related crime is so vast’ (PCC#2J).

Diversion entrepreneurs said the demand gap had created field conditions which provided fertile ground for PDD. Police organisations were leaning towards more proactive styles of policing that focus on prevention and early intervention through multi-agency partnerships:

The cuts to police budgets have forced different police forces to look at how they could be more innovative to drive down their demand long term and I think for a lot of areas, including drugs, that’s around changing the focus and putting more focus on prevention and early intervention ... [I]t’s that realisation that we can’t just let volumes of these types of crimes increase and increase and increase without trying to stop the problem at the source. (PCC#2I)

The demand gap appeared to have reinvigorated organisational interest in problem-oriented policing. This facilitated PDD because diversion entrepreneurs were able to use problem-solving techniques to develop and justify their proposals. It also meant officers were at least familiar with the rationale for police responses that aim to address the underlying causes of a problem. In one force, for example, where problem-oriented policing had become embedded, ‘driven from the top’ by an ‘inspirational’ chief constable, interviewees said that it had created a ‘problem-solving culture’ which fosters innovation:

People automatically, as a matter of sort of routine, will look for that root cause, and predominantly because the main drivers of our demand come around the vulnerabilities, which include your drugs, your alcohol, it’s looking at that, what different interventions we can put in place to reduce the harm on them but also to reduce the demand on us and other agencies. (Police_Officer#6D)

The challenge for diversion entrepreneurs was to convince police decision makers and other stakeholders that PDD would reduce demand by reducing reoffending and the resources needed to deal with people caught committing minor drug-related offences. In line with Fleming and Rhodes’ (2018) research on police decision making, I found that diversion entrepreneurs wove together a

variety of knowledge resources to help them make the case for diversion, including experiential knowledge, official data and research-based evidence.

Diversion entrepreneurs made use of 'quick facts' to demonstrate the scale of the demand from drug-related crime. This generally involved drawing on statistics produced by national public bodies and police and partner data at a local level. Numerous references were made to Home Office estimates that 45% of acquisitive offences are committed by regular heroin/crack cocaine users, and that drugs cost society £10.7 billion in policing, healthcare and crime (Mills *et al.* 2013).

Regarding resources, pre-arrest schemes were presented as a more efficient response to possession offences in that diversion saves police officers time and reduces demand on custody suites. Proposals to police managers included estimates comparing the cost of diversion against arresting people for simple possession. Frontline officers were persuaded by the promise of diversion schemes that were easy to use and created less paperwork than existing practices:

We didn't really go into too much about what the diversion would be in terms of the course, what do they see, what do they do ... It's a case of trying to stop police officers being tied up with so much paperwork, dealing with low-level drug offences. (Police_Officer#8H)

PDD was also framed as an innovation that would improve the cost effectiveness of the wider criminal justice system. In the following quotation, the officer draws attention to the resource implications of prosecuting dependent users of heroin and/or crack cocaine, as well as the likely impact of criminal sanctions:

It's not cost effective to us or the government to arrest someone, take them up to custody, give them a court date which they may or may not attend, if they don't attend then we spend more time looking for them, then they are arrested, then you take them to court and then they are given a fine, which most of the time they are not working and won't be able to pay so probably go and commit more crime, or a jail sentence, which costs money, probably won't get off drugs in jail because you can get drugs in jail, come out, commit more crime. (Police_Officer#6A)

Several arguments were put forward to justify PDD on the grounds of reducing reoffending. The key argument was that diverting people into drug treatment would reduce their drug use and drug-related criminality. Frequently cited supporting evidence included the National Treatment Agency's (2012) estimates that the average annual cost of crime for a dependent drug user not in treatment is £26,074, and that 26 offences are prevented for every offender in effective treatment. Another argument was that diversion would reduce non-dependent/recreational drug use by educating people about the potential health harms and criminal justice consequences. Expert knowledge from partners in drug services was used to attest to the likelihood of this outcome in the absence of 'hard data'.

There was little research-based knowledge on the outcomes of PDD when the first schemes of the new wave were being developed. Learning from arrest referral programmes, youth triage, and integrated offender management was used as a foundation:

What I wanted to see happen was us complimenting some of the stuff we had already done in force around offender management ... The idea was to engage with a wider cohort to address offending behaviour at an earlier stage to ensure that their lifestyles don't become chaotic. (Police_Officer#2D)

Architects of deferred prosecution schemes applied theories of deterrence and desistance to justify the model and explain how diversion can support offender rehabilitation by addressing the underlying causes of their offending and improving their life chances (Sherman and Neyroud 2012):

I done loads of research around housing and employment and relationships, about the effects on future offending. (Police_Officer#2D)

Diversion entrepreneurs cited emerging evidence from the randomised controlled trial of Operation Turning Point in the West Midlands (Neyroud and Slothower 2013). Interviewees also referred to

diversion programmes in Australia (Hughes and Ritter 2008), the High Point drug market intervention (Kennedy and Wong 2009), and Law Enforcement Assisted Diversion (LEAD) in Seattle (Beckett 2014).

What evidence was available was judged to be promising but inconclusive. Having conducted a literature review as part of the business case, the following officer concluded that:

It's too difficult for me to say distinctly yes or no, there is good evidence to say that diversion is better at preventing drug use than prosecution. (Police_Officer#2H)

The lack of evidence was used as a justification for the police to invest in piloting PDD schemes. Furthermore, rather than acting as a barrier, some diversion entrepreneurs viewed the lack of evidence as beneficial for the innovation process as it meant there were fewer constraints:

I think what's enabled some of this freedom is there is not an evidence base for [PDD] because it's new, if that makes sense, so there's no academic evaluation out there that says something doesn't work so I haven't had that obstacle to climb. (Police_Officer#1H)

Arguments about the potential of PDD to reduce reoffending were generally endorsed by drug service stakeholders. The police focus on crime, however, did invite criticism from those who believed PDD should be framed as a public health intervention:

I don't like how diversion is presented as a tool for like crime reduction ... People who use drugs should have a right to treatment because it would benefit their health ... I feel like a lot of the stuff is framed in that crime reduction way because they are trying to justify funding, rather than like from the human rights perspective. (Partner_Agency#6K)

Diversion entrepreneurs sought to resolve this conflict by being open about their motivations and ensuring that PDD schemes had harm reduction and treatment goals.

The case against criminalisation

PDD was normally framed as a 'pragmatic', 'sensible' or 'smart' response to minor drug offences and drug-related crimes:

It wasn't a matter of, you know, whether I had a view about drugs, it was a pragmatic point of view, that drugs were causing these problems. We weren't succeeding in what we were doing, so we needed to look at an alternative. (Police_Officer#5A)

Police generally just see it as sensible, a sort of pragmatic disposal for a group of people who are otherwise going to be (a) cluttering up your custody site and criminal justice system and (b) getting a whole load of consequences that are not in anybody's interests. (Partner_Agency#1A)

This framing reflected and appealed to the pragmatism of police culture (O'Neill and McCarthy 2014). It was also a deliberate attempt to depolarise drug policy debates by sidestepping ideological positions and focusing on 'the facts' about the shortcomings of enforcement interventions that seek to tackle drug problems through criminal sanctions. When framing PDD as a response to problems with existing practices, diversion entrepreneurs tended to argue that, despite the best efforts of the police, traditional criminal justice disposals do not act as a deterrent, have little discernible impact on drug-related crime, and can exacerbate harms via unintended consequences of criminalisation (Bacon 2024):

Deterrence has failed for those that we catch in possession and we don't help them by just giving them a fine or a criminal record. There has to be a better way to try and attempt to break problematic drug use. (Police_Officer#2H)

I can stand my corner in terms of the amount of police work I've done ... I'm probably one of the longest serving chief constables in the current crop and none of them are up close on open drug markets than me, locked up more drug dealers than me, sent more drug dealers to prison for a very long time ... [I]t hasn't had any impact, in fact it's made it worse. (Police_Officer#8D)

Another common tactic was to fuse pragmatism with moral grounds and argue that diversion was 'doing the right thing' by providing support instead of punishment and fostering a culture within the organisation that sees police encounters as an opportunity to assess the needs of the individual and make a positive intervention:

Rather than locking somebody up and spending money on rehabilitation that doesn't work ... why don't we just look at the root causes for things and work out why somebody is doing something and try and help them to stop it. (Police_Officer#7H)

While many police officers held similar viewpoints, found these arguments persuasive and were supportive of alternatives to criminalisation, diversion entrepreneurs encountered conflict, competing perspectives about the police role and drugs policing (Bacon 2022). 'Interpretive struggles' (Hardy and Maguire 2008) against the ingrained view that the core police task is to arrest criminals and subject them to criminal sanctions were a crucial part of the innovation process:

The dominant narrative ... is very much on enforcement as being always the right thing to do ... [I]f you try and talk about something different from enforcement, you have to choose your words very carefully because regardless of how often you say enforcement is key, as soon as you mention something that is not enforcement, they are like well what about enforcement? (Police_Officer#6H)

Diversion entrepreneurs also had to contend with police stigma towards people who use drugs as it acted as a barrier to diversion. In the following excerpt, the senior officer recounts a meeting during which he encouraged a new recruit who was about to execute a drugs warrant to reflect on why heroin users might commit supply offences and to look out for evidence of exploitation:

[T]hey looked at me in complete horror and the words from this PC was, 'What, you telling me we should treat smackheads as victims now?' ... [I]t really struck home to me that it doesn't matter what we do, you've still got this entrenched view, you know, particularly around heroin, you know, that it's horrible, it's dirty therefore the users are horrible, they are vile, they are dirty and they are nothing more than kind of scummy people, and it's really hard to break that. (Police_Officer#5H)

Police senior management generally considered alternatives to criminalisation to be politically sensitive and associated with various risks that had to be managed by diversion entrepreneurs. The foremost risk was the potential for 'reputational damage' to the police force and the PCC, which essentially amounted to concerns that PDD would be portrayed in the media as 'soft' on drugs and a step change towards decriminalisation. It was widely believed that such coverage would invite criticism from central government and negatively impact public perceptions.

Risk tolerance varied between forces. A few chief officers and PCCs, typically those who were nearing the end of their careers, argued that risk taking was needed to have an impact on drug policy debates:

We have stuck our head above the parapet, we have taken the blows but now I think we are beginning to win the debate because people are seeing that actually what we are saying has a degree of sense to it. (PCC#1D)

The tendency, however, was towards risk aversion. Accordingly, most diversion entrepreneurs liaised with the corporate communications department to develop a media strategy:

I had already sorted out media in the sense that nothing got out from the organisation about drugs without coming through me ... [W]e allowed them TV access and everything to [drug education sessions] to show them that actually ... this wasn't a soft, you know ... this was a hard-hitting thing, basically, although it wasn't delivered by the police. (Police_Officer#5A)

When framing PDD schemes in press releases and responses to media enquiries, these organisational and environmental determinants meant that diversion entrepreneurs had to stress that diversion is not decriminalisation, that it operates within the law, and does not challenge government policy. A key element of this messaging was that offenders have one chance to engage and could face prosecution if found in possession of drugs in the future:

If you talk to our PCC ... she will describe [diversion scheme] as a kind of, you know, one chance and you are out kind of approach, you get one option and then you get everything flung at you. (Partner_Agency#12A)

Another tactic used by diversion entrepreneurs to manage concerns about the risks of PDD was to downplay the innovativeness of the proposed scheme by framing it as an 'incremental' rather than a 'radical' innovation (Rogers 2003). This was done in two ways. The first was to frame PDD as an incremental innovation in that it aligns with and advances what police are already doing in relation to arrest referral, out-of-court disposals, and offender management. The second was to highlight that diversion schemes were already in operation in other police service areas:

The paper that I took to the [Community Safety Partnership] was basically this is what Thames Valley do, this is the blueprint, these are the successes, this is how we could build on it further for example by getting schools to directly refer in so prevent exclusions if there is drug possession. So that's how I sold it basically, this already happens, you know, relatively low risk, blah blah blah, very supportive. (PCC#5J)

Such framings sought to assure risk-averse or resistant decision makers that PDD is not uncharted territory, that it is uncontroversial and would only require minor adjustments to existing practices.

Conclusion

Innovations do not just happen. Through an empirical account of the emergence of PDD in England and Wales, this article has demonstrated how the schemes under study were brought into being via complex interactions between determinants at the individual, organisational and environmental levels (De Vries *et al.* 2016, 2018). The analytical focus is on the key police actors who were the driving force behind the new wave of PDD. Drawing on the concept of institutional entrepreneurship (Maguire *et al.* 2004, Hardy and Maguire 2008, Battilana *et al.* 2009), my central argument is that diversion entrepreneurs were of critical importance to the initiation stage of the innovation process. In fact, I would go so far as to say that they made diversion happen in their respective organisations. It has also been argued that diversion entrepreneurs used PDD as a mechanism for reframing drug problems and changing some of the basic understandings about the ends and means of (drugs) policing. An implication of the research presented here is that police scholars should pay closer attention to institutional entrepreneurship to enhance knowledge about processes of innovation and cultural change.

Individual determinants have tended to be overlooked or downplayed in research on police innovation (Willis and Mastrofski 2011, Weisburd and Braga 2019a). In contrast, the case studies in this article put diversion entrepreneurs front and centre to provide a rare insight into the people driving divergent change from within police organisations and how they went about it. The police officers who spearheaded drug diversion schemes occupied 'subject positions' (Maguire *et al.* 2004) that gave them autonomy, legitimacy and resource capability. They were highly motivated by emotive experiences and had a fervent interest in changing the institutional status quo. They had amassed craft knowledge and acquired a deep understanding about drug problems, policing and diversion through a combination of everyday police work, engagement with stakeholders, and, to a lesser extent, research. Research was considered crucial for information-gathering, conceptualising and planning activities. The amount of research undertaken, however, was very much dependent on the gut instinct, professional judgment, research skills and capacity of diversion entrepreneurs, unless senior leaders decided to allocate organisational resources. From an evidence-based policing perspective, it therefore cannot be said that the new wave of PDD was 'based on scientific evidence about what works best' (Sherman 1998, p. 2), but research certainly had 'a seat at the table' (Lum and Koper 2017, pp. 3–4), alongside a host of other decision-making factors.

As discussed in more detail elsewhere in relation to cultural change (Bacon 2022), the findings strongly indicate that the 'turning points' experienced by diversion entrepreneurs were the first step in the initiation of innovation. These decisive moments typically involved significant events that acted as a catalyst for reform, such as a drug overdose death or a family member with addiction,

although factors contributing to turning points could be more incremental or cumulative. It would be interesting to find out whether turning points are a *sine qua non* for police innovation in other areas of policing.

While a lot of attention has been given to the motivations, positions and actions of individual diversion entrepreneurs, the emergence of PDD schemes was found to be the outcome of a 'collective, incremental and multi-level' process (Hardy and Maguire 2008, p. 198). To initiate the schemes, diversion entrepreneurs collaborated with likeminded colleagues with applicable skillsets, liaised with partners with relevant expertise, and secured buy-in from chief officers. Patronage of leaders from the upper echelons was needed given the hierarchical structure of police organisations. The pooled resources of those involved in the innovation process were vital for developing schemes that were feasible and compatible with the ways in which police organisations operate, the internal politics of a force, the values of diverse stakeholders, and the wider sociopolitical context.

This depiction of institutional entrepreneurship as collective action aligns with theories about policy processes and how policy change occurs. The 'advocacy coalition framework' (Jenkins-Smith *et al.* 2014), for example, focuses on networks of actors who share beliefs and compete to get their views into policy. Likewise, Stevens' (2024) 'policy constellations' approach is concerned with actors 'who come together in deploying various forms of socially structured power to pursue the institutionalisation in policy of shared moral preferences and material interests' (p. 5). It is not my intention to compare and contrast these theories or offer my views on their strengths and weaknesses. The primary reason for mentioning this commonality is that it adds credence to my account insofar as the findings are broadly similar to those of researchers from across a range of disciplines and policy domains. Another reason is to flag up other theories that could be used by police researchers to make sense of innovations in policing.

This article has also examined drivers, facilitators and barriers of PDD at the organisational and environmental levels. Diversion entrepreneurs operated within their field conditions to harness the structural and cultural features of police organisations and assemble an array of arguments that resonated with the interests of diverse stakeholders (Maguire *et al.* 2004). Organisational priorities and government policies were used to frame problems and justify diversion. Police budget cuts had created fertile ground for diversion as police organisations were leaning towards more proactive styles of policing which focus on prevention by addressing the underlying causes of crime. This facilitated PDD because diversion entrepreneurs were able to use problem-solving techniques to develop their proposals. They wove together various forms of knowledge – craft, political and research-based (Fleming and Rhodes 2018) – to make the case that diversion would reduce demand by reducing reoffending and the resources needed to deal with people caught committing minor drug-related offences. Making the case for diversion also required diversion entrepreneurs to highlight the shortcomings of existing practices and present diversion as a viable alternative to traditional enforcement interventions that seek to tackle drug problems through criminal sanctions. This involved 'interpretive struggles' (Hardy and Maguire 2008) over the police role, in particular the ingrained view that the core police task is to catch and convict, contending with police stigma towards people who use drugs, and managing (perceptions of) the risk of reputational damage from media portrayals of PDD as 'soft' on drugs and a step change towards decriminalisation.

My research provides a counternarrative to the dominant portrayal of police reform as being largely 'top-down and outside-inside' (Bayley 2008, p. 7). Although most diversion entrepreneurs were in middle management positions when their schemes were initiated, the case studies reveal how innovation originated from the lower levels of police organisations and came about through a bottom-up process, rather than being imposed from above. Furthermore, while many police reforms have been designed by people outside the police, the emergence of PDD shows that police organisations can be the source of innovative ideas. The relative success on display here also provides a different story to the bulk of literature on police reform which reaches the dispiriting conclusion that 'efforts to change the police often fall far short or fail' (Skogan 2008, p. 23). It is not possible to make grand claims about how best to reform the police based on this research alone.

What I can conclude, however, is that, if the field conditions are favourable, reform efforts that are internally driven by institutional entrepreneurs might be able to navigate the numerous obstacles to innovations in policing and bring about change.

The decision to focus on the initiation stage of the PDD innovation process means that the story is inevitably incomplete. The logical next step would be to give attention to implementation and examine the activities involved in putting diversion schemes into practice. This could be achieved through a process evaluation of how the schemes were implemented and what was actually delivered, concentrating on adherence and moderators of fidelity (Carroll *et al.* 2007, Stevens *et al.* 2023). In line with Willis and Mastrofski (2011), my view is that longitudinal studies of the entire innovation process are a fruitful avenue for future research on innovations in policing. Longitudinal research would further understanding by describing and explaining the temporal sequences, conditions and decisions that influence real-time developments in police organisations. It would also enable researchers to document the role of institutional entrepreneurs over the life course of an innovation, what happens when they cease to participate in the implementation process, and how innovations are impacted by changes in the organisational and environmental context.

Notes

1. PDD schemes have been recognised as innovative by police and non-police organisations. Durham Constabulary, for example, describe Checkpoint as 'an innovative programme to navigate people away from the cycle of reoffending' (Weir *et al.* 2022). Since 2016, the diversion schemes that are the focus of this article have been the winner or runner-up in Howard League for Penal Reform awards for innovative work that encourages desistance from crime and helps make communities safer.
2. Innovation researchers tend to break the innovation process down into two temporal stages – initiation and implementation – each with multiple steps. There is widespread agreement that innovation is dynamic, iterative and messy, and should not be conceptualised as a linear and predictable process (Rogers 2003, Willis and Mastrofski 2011).
3. While I do not have the space to give this point much attention, it is worth noting that there are striking similarities between the concepts of 'institutional' and 'policy' entrepreneurship. The literature on institutional entrepreneurship provided the most useful theoretical toolkit for analysing the emergence of PDD schemes in England and Wales. Policy entrepreneurship, however, would have been a workable alternative and could be applied in future research on police innovation. 'Policy entrepreneurs' are key actors in the policy making process who seek to influence policy outcomes to promote their personal goals. The term was introduced by Kingdon (1984) in his hugely influential book on agenda setting in public policy. In a nutshell, the 'multiple streams' approach suggests that an issue comes onto the agenda and becomes the subject of policy formation when a 'window of opportunity' arises for policy entrepreneurs to connect a problem of concern with a policy solution that fits with the politics of the time. What distinguishes policy entrepreneurs from the many actors who participate in policy making is their 'desire to significantly change current ways of doing things in their area of interest' (Mintrom and Norman 2009, p. 650). Many scholars have sought to study common attributes of policy entrepreneurs, the actions they take, and the degree of success they meet in championing policy innovations. According to literature that identifies innovation promotion as the task of entrepreneurial actions (e.g. Cairney 2018, Mintrom 2020), the prevalent activities through which this goal is pursued are: framing ideas and problems, developing policy solutions, building coalitions, and seeking opportunities and attention (Capano and Galanti 2021).
4. Ethics approval was provided by the University of Sheffield (Reference Number 018870).
5. Control Strategies are used to set out and communicate the operational priorities for a force or command area. They also establish the long-term priorities for crime prevention, intelligence and enforcement. Police and Crime Plans set out the PCC's strategic police and crime objectives.

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