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The service that police officers want to provide, and why they struggle to deliver it



Key points

- The public, frontline and senior officers largely agree on the core functions of local policing and the minimum standards of service delivery they should provide: responsiveness, fair treatment, accessibility and engagement. There is also a shared recognition that these are not being delivered consistently.
- Policing activities most associated with delivery of these core domains are also those most displaced by reactive demand, abstractions and the need to respond to non-crime emergencies.
- The main challenge to public trust and police legitimacy is not disagreement about policing priorities but overcoming the structural and organisational processes that make it hard for officers to deliver them.

Background

Public trust and confidence remain central to policing by consent. However, contemporary policing operates in an environment characterised by organisational strain, intense scrutiny and a growing gap between what the public expects and what police can deliver. This can make it harder to build and maintain trust. As a result, questions about whether and how neighbourhood policing, visibility and action on public priorities can be delivered have become increasingly significant within policy, cultural and public debate.

Research on procedural justice and police legitimacy demonstrates that public confidence and satisfaction depend not solely upon crime outcomes but on whether policing is experienced as fair, respectful and trustworthy. Recent work on the 'Minimum Policing Standard' reinforces these findings, identifying appropriate response, behaviour and treatment, and presence and engagement as core public demands for local policing. These standards are less about the outcomes delivered

and more about high quality processes that prioritise accessibility, communication and reassurance.

However, the conditions under which public trust and police legitimacy are produced have become progressively more difficult: in the context of austerity, police services have faced growing resource pressures together with increasingly complex demand involving mental health crises, safeguarding, domestic abuse and wider vulnerability-related incidents. Simultaneously, rapid recruitment has led to a younger, less experienced workforce, while high-profile misconduct cases and social media scrutiny have intensified pressures around confidence and legitimacy.

Against this backdrop, questions about what the police should prioritise, what kind of service officers themselves believe communities need, and whether contemporary policing systems can deliver on these expectations become ever more urgent. Our study sought to address these questions, examining the extent to which police officers share the public's views of what makes good local policing, the barriers they believe undermine delivery, and what these mean for confidence, legitimacy, and the future of relational policing.

What we did

We conducted a series of focus groups with frontline officers and senior police leaders across four police force areas in England and Wales.

The first stage involved two rounds of focus groups with 47 neighbourhood officers, response officers and PCSOs. Round 1 explored participants' views on the public priorities and expectations we identified in earlier focus groups and a nationally representative survey to define a 'minimum policing standard'.

Officers reflected on the extent to which these aligned with their own views of good local policing and discussed barriers to delivery. Round 2 presented a different group of participants with findings generated during Round 1, and further explored organisational, operational and relational challenges impacting service provision and opportunities for the future of neighbourhood policing.

Subsequently, we conducted focus groups with senior officers from the same force areas, presenting them with findings from both public and frontline police views for discussion. We asked senior leaders, including Assistant Chief Constables, Chief Superintendents, and Superintendents, to reflect upon the implications for contemporary service delivery, public trust and confidence, organisational legitimacy and the future of neighbourhood policing under sustained demand pressures and workforce limitations.

Key findings

Our findings demonstrate strong alignment between what the public expect, and what frontline officers and senior police leaders see as the core components of good local policing. However, they also reveal tensions between these aspirations and the operational realities shaping service delivery.

Frontline officer views

The frontline groups reveal three key themes:

1. Alignment with public views of core functions.

Frontline officers agreed with our earlier public focus groups about core policing standards concerning responsiveness, visibility, continuity of contact and victim care. They also recognised that under current operational conditions these priorities could not be consistently delivered.

2. Impacts of demand on neighbourhood policing and prevention.

Officers framed neighbourhood policing as central to building trust because it enables visibility, continuity, local knowledge and early intervention. However, they described contemporary policing as fundamentally reactive rather than responsive. Staffing pressures, abstractions and increased workload due to mental health incidents and wider non-police demand all serve to reduce visibility, preventative work and neighbourhood policing capacity. Police spend too much time reacting to events, and not enough time responding to public needs and priorities.

3. Influence of organisational culture and operational pressure on service delivery.

PCSOs, neighbourhood and response officers raised significant concerns about organisational culture, communication and leadership, including disconnects between neighbourhood and response teams, institutional risk-aversion, and feeling unsupported and undervalued by leadership amid increasing pressure and scrutiny. These pressures contributed to the erosion of morale, trust and professional autonomy, fostering increasingly defensive, compliance-driven and ultimately less effective forms of policing.

Senior officer reflections

Reflecting on findings from both public and frontline officer focus groups, senior officer discussions revealed three interconnected themes:

1. Confidence and legitimacy as relational processes. Senior leaders were unsurprised by the alignment between public and frontline officer priorities. They similarly agreed that responsiveness, communication, visibility and respectful treatment remain central to local policing while acknowledging that delivering on these priorities under current demand conditions would inevitably require trade-offs elsewhere in police response capacity.

2. Contemporary demand and the erosion of relational policing. Participants described demand as complex and resource-intensive, particularly in safeguarding, domestic abuse, vulnerability and mental health contexts. They argued that these ongoing pressures increasingly undermine preventative and relational forms of policing despite recognising neighbourhood policing as vital for building public trust.

3. Organisational culture and service delivery. Correspondingly, senior officers reaffirmed the importance of neighbourhood policing and partnership reform (such as Right Care, Right Person). However, they argued that sustained underinvestment across health, social care and third sector services has resulted in police absorbing substantial levels of non-crime demand due to wider system failure. They also highlighted issues of organisational justice, acknowledging how narratives of excessive demand, workload strains, organisational pressures and disconnected relationships with leadership influence officer morale, behaviour and public-facing service delivery.

Conclusions

Overall, our findings reinforce the value of neighbourhood policing, preventative engagement and relational policing infrastructures. These are all fundamental to the role of police in the eyes of officers and citizens alike. The central challenge in providing the kind of service valued by both police and the public is not disagreement about what constitutes good policing but the structural pressures limiting delivery. Our findings move beyond a simple lack-of-capacity argument towards questions of how prolonged institutional resource pressure informs organisational thinking, operational priorities and assumptions about what policing can realistically provide.

The findings also underscore the importance of organisational justice within the police organisation. Officers who feel unsupported, disconnected from leadership or constrained by defensive organisational culture become less proactive and more risk-averse, which ultimately affects service delivery. Fixing the relationship between police and the public relies on fixing relationships within the police.

Next steps

This research identifies a fundamental challenge currently facing police. There is evidently considerable alignment between the service the public wants from police and the service police want to deliver, across ranks within forces. However, there are significant barriers preventing this shared vision from becoming a reality. These involve, most fundamentally, resource constraints, but also the ways the police make decisions and the outputs and outcomes they prioritise.

One response to this problem is to highlight the importance of honest public communication and manage expectations about what the police are for and can deliver under contemporary operational conditions. On this account, people cannot always have the police service they say they desire: there needs to be an open conversation about this, and about what to do given those resource constraints.

These are important considerations, and such conversations are sorely needed. But this framing accepts the idea that relational, locally-based and community-focused policing is a Cinderella service; a component of police work that can be cut or starved of funds as and when these are needed elsewhere. To be clear, this will sometimes be the case. When it comes, for example, to a decision about whether to safeguard victims of sexual abuse or maintain visible patrolling outside the highest crime locations, the former would seem more important than the latter. But it cannot and should not always be the case. If neighbourhood/local policing remains a fundamental cornerstone upon which policing by consent is constructed, it cannot be taken for granted and consistently sidelined – whether due to response pressures, abstractions or other organisational priorities. Such an approach risks undermining the trust and legitimacy upon which all policing relies.

As well as an open conversation with the public, a debate is also needed within policing about processes, aims and values. Continuing with policies and practices that block officers from delivering the kind of service they wish to, and which the public desires, risks not only demoralisation within the organisation but further deterioration of its relationship with the communities it serves. How this challenge can be met in the face of all the other challenges currently facing police will be a crucial question as police reform efforts unfold the coming years.

Authors

The research team were:

Ben Bradford, University College London;
David Rowlands, University of Leeds;
Diana Peel, University of Leeds;
Christine A. Weirich, University of Leeds; and
Adam Crawford, Universities of York and Leeds.

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For further information

Read more about our project “Towards a minimum policing standard” on our website: vulnerabilitypolicing.org.uk/minimum-policing-standard

Lead investigator:

Professor Ben Bradford
ben.bradford@ucl.ac.uk

Centre Co-Director:

Professor Adam Crawford
adam.crawford@york.ac.uk

