



Home Office

BUILDING A SAFE, JUST
AND TOLERANT SOCIETY

The role of police authorities in public engagement

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The views expressed in this report are those of the authors, not necessarily those of the Home Office (nor do they reflect Government policy).

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Summary

Background and aims

Promoting the involvement of citizens in decisions about how they are policed is a central focus for the Home Office. This has centred attention on the role of police authorities in engaging with communities and using public feedback to hold police forces to account for the delivery of services.

The purpose of this study was to examine how police authorities engage the public in dialogue and to identify the benefits to the police service. It also aimed to identify how best to direct improvements to this area of activity. Specific objectives were to:

- examine mechanisms used by police authorities to inform the public, gather their views and involve them in decision-making;
- seek to understand how effectively police authorities engage the public;
- identify critical success factors;
- examine barriers to adopting more effective methods and means to overcome them;
- identify examples of good practice and innovation;
- explore the advantages and disadvantages of police authorities working jointly with or independently from forces and other agencies;
- explore how public feedback is used and examine its impact; and
- examine public awareness of, and views on, police authorities and public accountability in policing.

Methods

There were three elements to the research:

- A telephone survey of all police authorities.
- Case studies in six police authorities, all of which had attempted to innovate in engaging with the public. They encompassed a range of different sizes and resources, approaches to community engagement, urban and rural areas and regions of England and Wales.
- Fourteen focus groups with the public, structured to obtain the views of people of different ethnic groups, social classes, ages and both genders. They were held in London, Wales, the North of England and the Midlands.

Fieldwork was carried out between August 2002 and February 2003. The study was carried out in co-operation with the Association of Police Authorities (APA). We are very grateful for the APA's help, and that of police authorities and other organisations which participated.

Findings

Views of the public

- There was a consensus amongst participants that police visibility and accessibility were issues of key importance. They felt that they did not see officers patrolling on foot often enough and that local police stations were inaccessible.
- There was a perception that police priorities were inappropriate, response times too slow, and that a police officer's attitude and communication skills were key to whether the public considered them to be doing a good job. However, there was some recognition that there are restraints on the police, such as the perceived high crime levels, which makes it more difficult for them to be effective.

- There was a general consensus in the focus groups that the public does not have a say in decisions about policing. Most participants thought that the public should participate in decision-making although there was some cynicism about whether it would make a difference. Awareness of police-public consultation was low.
- The vast majority had not previously heard of police authorities and did not know what their role was. The few who had heard of them generally did not know what they were or what their role was. The name 'police authority' did not signal an identity separate from 'the police' more generally.
- When participants learnt more about the role of police authorities, they thought that they were necessary and useful, if they were effective. However, many people were sceptical whether they were effective, largely because of their low public profile. There was a strong view that police authorities should publicise themselves more effectively.
- Most people saw police authorities' independence from police forces as crucial and the way members are selected was seen as the key to independence. There was some scepticism about the role of members nominated by local authorities, with more approval of the concept of independent members. There was concern that there might be a 'closed shop' or 'old boys' network' and that members might have too close a relationship with the police.
- The focus groups suggested that the public was, in general, poorly informed about policing and tended to see policing only in terms of preventing and dealing with crime.
- People wanted better communication, information and involvement. Feelings were mixed about whether information was wanted about how well the police are performing (many expressed no interest, those that were interested expressed concern over how performance would be measured and about the usefulness of statistics). What interest there was related to performance information at a very local level and it was felt that this should be linked to policing priorities.
- Reasons for why public consultation might not work included public apathy, public disagreement over priorities, and a lack of expertise and confidence. A lack of response from the police authority would also make people lose interest.

These findings are similar to that of research about public participation and confidence in public services more generally, suggesting that there are wider issues to be tackled.

Communications and public image

- People interviewed in the case study sites recognised that there was little public awareness of police authorities and their role as separate and independent organisations from police forces. Some felt that authorities' role was not well recognised in the police service and the Criminal Justice System, too. As in the focus groups, the name 'police authority' was not thought to convey its role clearly. Many thought that a high public profile and a separate identity were crucial for police authorities to do their job properly. However, this view was not universal, including amongst some police authority members and staff.
- Police authorities only use limited resources for marketing and communications. It is relatively rare for them to use local radio and TV or to distribute the policing plan or annual report to all households. Partnership with other organisations can maximise the use of resources.
- Most authorities have a website or page on another site and the rest planned to have one within a year. About half could be contacted by e-mail.

- There was little solid evidence as to which publicity methods are most effective, but the overall impact appears to be low.

Authorities' general approaches to public consultation

- Whilst a coherent and strategic approach to consultation can ensure the best use of resources, not all authorities have a strategy yet.
- In most case study sites, there was considerable joint working with police forces on consultation, both at a strategic level and that of individual consultation exercises. One authority empowered the force to undertake the majority of consultation. In general, overlap and duplication were relatively infrequent. However, some authorities felt that they were not fully aware of all force consultation. Authorities and forces generally saw considerable benefits to joint working although there were arguments for working independently in certain circumstances.
- There has been a drive towards multi-agency consultation, following the Crime and Disorder Act 1998 and the expansion of consultation in the public sector. On balance, views in the case study sites about multi-agency consultation were positive. The extent to which it flourished could vary widely within and between authorities, depending on political and geographical factors, and the strength of the local Crime and Disorder Reduction Partnership (CDRP). Mechanisms to ensure systematic multi-agency work were patchy.
- Police authorities' new status on CDRPs, (from April 1st, 2003), and the streamlining of three-year crime and disorder policing strategies, should promote a more consistent relationship, so that agencies work to a similar timetable. Joint or co-ordinated consultation strategies could facilitate this further. Further integration of CDRP and police authority consultation arrangements may also emerge, although it was not yet clear exactly how this might work.
- Advance timetables for consultation help voluntary organisations to mobilise their members.

The role of police authority members

- Members can play a vital role in authorities' community engagement work. There were examples of members driving through reforms and adding value to specific consultation events. However, others had less involvement, possibly because they focus on other police authority work, whilst some were perceived as barriers to change.
- Members set police authority budgets, so a lack of understanding of the benefits of consultation can result in it being afforded a low priority.
- Members are linked to a geographic area where they are responsible for community engagement. If they lived locally and had a genuine stake in the area they could sometimes be more likely to be able to act as genuine 'community leaders'.
- In the case study sites, there could be different consultation arrangements in different districts. Sometimes, this was a result of tailoring methods to an area, but in others it was a result of a lack of involvement or initiative by members linked to those districts.

Effectiveness of consultation methods

- It has long been recognised that the traditional consultation format, police community consultative groups (PCCGs) fail to attract a representative audience and to generate a meaningful output on strategic issues. About three-quarters of authorities still ran PCCG-

style meetings, despite none considering them very effective. Some had tried to reform or replace them. In the case study sites, this had had mixed success.

- There was a marked increase in authorities' use of other mechanisms such as market research methods. Many had experimented with innovative techniques such as electronic consultation.
- The need to tailor consultation methods to specific groups applies particularly to traditionally 'hard-to-hear' groups (for example, certain minority ethnic groups and people with disabilities), who are least likely to respond to traditional methods of engagement. There was evidence of successful engagement with hard-to-hear groups in some case study areas, though the survey indicated very mixed success within and between authorities. Some authorities had successfully engaged certain hard-to-hear groups but not others. There was only limited evidence of a structured approach to this kind of engagement.

Impact of consultation

- In the case study sites, authorities did not generally monitor or communicate the impact of consultation clearly. There was generally a lack of data concerning the costs of consultation and no systematic approach to assessing the benefits of public engagement.
- There were examples of consultation impacting on policing plans, quality of service (especially at a local level), and, in particular, on police-community relations and community cohesion.

Barriers to effective consultation

- About half the authorities considered 'consultation overload' and lack of interest from the public to be barriers. Feedback on the outcome of consultation can help motivate people to participate but was piecemeal. The case study authorities recognised that feedback and evaluation of the effectiveness of consultation were areas for improvement. In some sites, Best Value reviews of authorities' public consultation/community engagement functions were a significant stimulus to a more strategic approach.
- To some degree, an authority's ability to consult effectively was linked to the level of resources invested. However, it was possible to make the most of limited resources, for example, through close working with partner organisations. Consultation and research skills were not always available in-house and it could be expensive to buy-in expertise.
- In some case study sites, local political factors hampered authorities' ability to work with other agencies and operate effectively.
- The need to balance local views with national priorities limited impact. Other barriers were inadequate processes to feed consultation output into decision-making, limitations to the authority's remit (authorities have no remit to cover operational policing matters), and the quality of the output of consultation.

Conclusions

- Police authorities have begun to develop more innovative and strategic approaches to engaging the community, but progress is patchy. Many authorities, though, are reviewing their approaches, showing that they recognise the need to engage more effectively. It can be argued that authorities cannot provide true accountability or engagement while largely invisible to the public, as they are at present. However, there was not a consensus amongst stakeholders that a higher public profile and separate identity for authorities was the way forward. This suggests that a wider debate is needed about the role of authorities in community engagement.

1.

Introduction

Citizen involvement in policing has become a central element in the Home Office's reform agenda. This report examines how police authorities, which are charged with consulting the public and holding police forces to account for delivery of services, currently engage with the public. It examines how the current system could be made more effective.

The context to the research is the drive to make the police service more responsive to citizens' needs, to increase confidence in the police and to improve local accountability for policing. If the police service is not connected to the public's views, there is a risk that its priorities will not match those of the public, leading to dissatisfaction and lack of confidence. Confidence in the police, while still relatively high compared to other Criminal Justice System agencies, has been declining (Flood-Page and Taylor, eds., 2003). These developments have put the spotlight on police authorities. It is crucial that they are fulfilling their statutory responsibility to consult the public in an efficient and effective manner.

Police authorities

There is a police authority for every police force in England and Wales. Most authorities consist of 17 members – nine councillors, three magistrates and five independent – though some have more. Councillor members are chosen by local authorities (or joint committees of local authorities) and local magistrates are chosen by Magistrates' Courts Selection Panels. Applications to become independent members are advertised. A selection panel consisting of a councillor or magistrate member of the police authority, a person appointed by the Home Secretary, and a third person chosen by the other two panel members produces a list of suitable independent applicants. The Home Secretary chooses a shortlist, which is sent back to the councillor and magistrate members, who make the final selection.

The Police Act (1964) gave police authorities certain powers and responsibilities (along with Chief Constables and the Home Office) as part of the 'tripartite' system of police governance. They have since been given extra powers, notably statutory responsibility for consulting local communities (the focus of this report) and the power to set local precepts for funding. After the Police and Magistrates' Courts Act (PMCA) came into effect in 1995, authorities also acquired responsibility for ensuring 'an efficient and effective' police force for their respective areas.

Box 1 Police authorities' key roles and responsibilities

There are 43 police authorities, one for each force area. They must:

- make sure arrangements are in place to consult the local community about the policing of their area and their priorities;
- publish an annual local policing plan and a best value performance plan, setting out the policing priorities, performance targets and the allocation of resources;
- monitor the performance of the force in delivering the policing plan;
- report to the community on performance during the previous year;
- appoint the chief constable and other very senior officers and deal with some complaints and discipline issues;
- under the Best Value initiative, scrutinise police activity for possible improvements; and
- publish a three-year strategy plan, which must be approved by the Home Secretary.

Police authorities' statutory requirement to consult the public has developed since the early 1980s and has been shaped by various pieces of legislation.

Box 2 Police authorities' statutory requirements to consult

- Following the Scarman report into inner-city disturbances in the early 1980s, the *Police and Criminal Evidence Act (1984)* required police authorities to consult the public prior to the setting of local police objectives and to publish a local policing plan (drafted by the chief constable) outlining objectives.
- The *Police Act (1996)* consolidated the legal requirement for police authorities to make arrangements to obtain the views of the people in that area about policing matters; seek their co-operation with the police in preventing crime and take account of the views of communities in setting local police priorities.
- The *Crime and Disorder Act (1998)* created Crime and Disorder Reduction Partnerships (CDRPs) under which police forces and local authorities, in co-operation with police authorities and other agencies, were required to consult the public on a local audit of crime and disorder and a strategy for tackling them. Under the *Police Reform Act (2002)*, police authorities have the same status as police forces and local authorities on CDRPs.
- The *Local Government Act (1999)* put a duty on police authorities to achieve Best Value in the provision of services to the public. Under this duty, police authorities are required to consult users of services.
- Under the *Race Relations (Amendment) Act (2000)* police authorities have a duty to consult on the likely impact of proposed policies on the promotion of race equality, publish the results and ensure public access to policing information and services.

Wider developments in recent years have emphasised the importance of engaging the public through consultation and other means:

- Police authorities must now publish three-year strategy plans. They must have regard to the National Policing Plan, which sets out central government's framework of strategic national priorities and performance indicators. The National Policing Plan spells out the importance of authorities and forces engaging and consulting their local communities to inform priorities and target setting (Home Office, 2002).
- Crime and Disorder Reduction Partnerships (CDRPs) have had a responsibility to consult the public on tackling crime and disorder since they came into operation in 1999. Since April 2003, police authorities' role in CDRPs has been upgraded so that they are now on the same footing as police forces and local authorities.
- Public disorder in a number of cities in 2001 renewed interest in effective communication between police and public. Engagement with the public – in particular with disaffected groups – is seen as one way of promoting community cohesion by, for example, identifying areas with high social tension and tackling contributory factors such as high crime (Home Office, 2002).
- There has been a wider trend within the public sector to use consultation to improve service delivery by, for example, targeting services on what people want and informing decision-making (Audit Commission, 1999).

Previous research

Previous studies have mostly perceived a lack of power and influence for police authorities within the tripartite system. Many writers argued that the Police Act (1964) actually gave little substantive influence to police authorities and that often authorities failed to use the powers

they were granted (see Jones and Newburn, 1997:4). Previous research on police governance and accountability also detected a gradual centralisation of control over policing, not least because of the role of the Home Office in funding the police service. Jones et al. (1994) concluded not only that police authorities lacked statutory power and were self-limiting, but that they also often lacked both information about policing and the expertise to respond to what information they were given. It was perceived that Chief Constables were often only held to account locally with their consent and that key relationships in this area were between the Home Office, the Association of Chief Police Officers and bodies such as Her Majesty's Inspectorate of Constabulary and the Audit Commission (see Jones and Newburn, 1997:219). The introduction of the Police and Magistrates' Courts Act (1994) enhanced the statutory role of authorities and there is evidence that many realised the need to become more effective bodies (ibid.).

Previous research on police-public engagement has broadly focused on the shortcomings of the main consultation mechanism, Police Consultative Community Groups (PCCGs) and on attempts to move towards more effective methods. PCCGs have been criticised for almost two decades (see Chapter 4) and their failure to reach marginalised sections of the population became a particular concern in recent years because of increasing pressures to engage with 'hard-to-hear' groups (Jones and Newburn, 1997). Police authorities and forces have adopted other methods, including surveys, citizen panels and focus groups, but to a variable extent (Jones and Newburn, 2001; Williams, 2001). Research has identified good practice principles for police-public consultation. In addition, research and guidance on consultation in the public sector lays out similar principles (for example, Sargeant and Steele, 1998; Audit Commission, 1999, 2003c; Cabinet Office, 2002). These principles provide well-established yardsticks against which to assess police authorities.

Recent developments

The Home Secretary has indicated that he is interested in exploring changes, in the short and longer terms, to clarify and strengthen accountability arrangements for policing in England and Wales. Citizen participation in policing is seen as not only a mechanism to improve services but as a means to promote wider civil renewal. He has called for a debate on how this should be done, setting out four principles for any changes:

- the need to safeguard the political impartiality of the police;
- the need for clear accountability mechanisms to support more effective services;
- transparency about who is responsible for tackling crime and holding the police accountable; and
- improved public understanding of policing and its effectiveness.

Measures such as making more meaningful performance data available are being considered. A project has been established to develop community participation in crime reduction, which will help practitioners engage with communities in finding solutions to local crime problems. A 'citizen-focused policing' programme of work is also under way to improve the way forces understand, communicate with and engage with their communities, whether they be direct users of services or members of the wider public. It will encourage a way of working that recognises, understands and applies the experience and needs of citizens to decision-making and service delivery. The programme of work also aims to apply the principles of wider public service reform – standards, flexibility, accountability and choice – to the context of policing. The Home Office and Association of Police Authorities have set up a National Practitioner Panel to spread learning in the area of consultation and customer feedback and to devise a strategy for disseminating good practice. Three pilots in police authorities to test more innovative ways of building dialogue with the public are also about to commence. These interventions will build on the results of this report.

Aims of the research

The broad aims were to examine how police authorities engage the public in dialogue and identify the benefits to the police service. It also aimed to suggest ways in which police authorities could enhance this role. The specific objectives were to:

- examine mechanisms used by police authorities to inform the public, gather their views and involve them in decision-making;
- seek to understand how effectively police authorities engage the public;
- identify critical success factors;
- examine barriers to adopting more effective methods and means to overcome them;
- identify examples of good practice and innovation;
- explore the advantages and disadvantages of police authorities working jointly with or independently from the police and other agencies;
- explore how police authorities use public feedback and examine its impact (for example, on the annual policing plan, service delivery and police-community relations); and
- examine public awareness about, and views on, police authorities and public accountability in policing.

The criteria against which we examine police authorities can be summed up as:

- *Transparency* – does the public understand how decisions are made about policing, how to contribute their views and how the feedback they give is used?
- *Wide reach* – do authorities reach a diverse and representative population?
- *Appropriateness of methods* – do authorities define their aims and choose methods which result in the desired outcome?
- *Impact* – do the public's views influence decision-making, service delivery or have other quantifiable benefits?

While cost-effectiveness would be an important additional criterion, we were unable to isolate accurately the costs devoted to consultation (partly because they are not necessarily separately identifiable). Despite the primary focus on police authorities, much of their community engagement activity is carried out jointly with police forces or other agencies, or may even be delegated to the police force. The research attempts to separate out police authority activity wherever possible, but inevitably there was a lack of clarity in some places.

Methodology

The research methodology consisted of three separate elements:

- A telephone survey with all police authorities. The interview was carried out with the person with responsibility for consultation, previously identified through a screening interview. The fieldwork was carried out in August and September 2002.¹
- Case studies of six police authorities, chosen primarily on the basis of the survey data (see Box 3). Authorities should have carried out a wide range of consultation activity,

¹ One authority, the City of London, was excluded from analysis as although it undertakes some consultation, its activity did not fit into the survey framework. The survey is therefore based on responses from 42 authorities.

including with 'hard-to-hear' groups, and attempted to innovate or change methods. They had reviewed, or were reviewing, consultation and appeared to have, or be developing, a strategic approach. The sites also encompass authorities with different approaches to consultation, in urban and rural areas, and in different geographic areas of England and Wales. The level of resources available to them varied – the best resourced had three times as much per head of the population to spend as the least. We chose two sites which had experienced recent public disorder. A total of 67 interviews were carried out with police authority members and staff, representatives of police forces, local authorities, CDRPs and voluntary organisations. We carried out two focus groups with community and youth consultative workers employed by one authority. Interviews were taped, transcribed and analysed using a matrix-mapping method. We also observed twelve public and other meetings, and collected relevant documents. Fieldwork took place between November 2002 and February 2003.

- Fourteen focus groups with members of the public, structured so as to obtain the views of people of different ethnic groups, social classes, ages and both genders. They were held in London, Wales, the North and the Midlands in November and December 2002.

Results from the focus groups are covered in more depth in a separate report (*'Public Perceptions of Police Accountability and Decision-making'*, also available as an RDS Online Report). This research was carried out with the co-operation of the Association of Police Authorities and we are grateful for their encouragement of the study.

Box 3 The case study sites

- *Avon and Somerset* – covers a relatively large area, spanning rural areas and the city of Bristol. Three per cent of the 1.5 million population comes from minority ethnic groups, mostly concentrated in Bristol. The police authority had a budget of £770k and a staff of eight full-time equivalents.
- *Greater Manchester* – has the second largest budget (£2.66m) and staff (51) in England and Wales. It serves a population of 2.6 million. The minority ethnic population comprises 9 per cent of the total population.
- *Metropolitan Police Authority* – came into being in 2000, when it took over supervision of the Metropolitan Police Service from the Home Secretary. Unlike other authorities, it does not approve the budget or decide the council tax contribution to policing. Instead, there is a more complicated process involving the Mayor and the Greater London Assembly. The MPA had by far the largest annual budget of all authorities (£7m) and the largest staff (70 people). It serves a population of 7.4 million, and has the highest minority ethnic population (29%).
- *North Yorkshire* – covers a very large rural area, but also includes the city of York. It has a relatively small population of 0.8 million, of whom only 1 per cent come from minority ethnic groups. It had a budget of £616k and a staff of three-and-a-half.
- *South Wales* – the authority has a mixture of rural and urban areas including the cities of Swansea and Cardiff. It had a budget of £483k and five members of staff. The population is 1.3 million, of which 3 per cent come from minority ethnic groups.
- *West Yorkshire* – serves a population of 2.1 million. It is a mixed socio-demographic area with a minority ethnic population of 11 per cent, and pockets of both affluence and poverty. The authority had a budget of £1.4m and a staff of 16.

Source: APA Police Authority Benchmarking Report, 2003.

Structure of the report

Chapter 2 examines the views of the public on accountability in policing and the extent to which authorities are visible and their activities transparent to the public. In Chapter 3, the broad approaches of authorities to consulting the public are discussed, with a particular emphasis on how they relate to police forces and to other partners. Chapter 4 looks at the mechanisms used by police authorities to engage in dialogue and how successfully police authorities are doing this. In Chapter 5 there is a discussion about the impact of consultation and Chapter 6 examines barriers to successful public engagement and how to overcome them. Chapter 7 draws together conclusions from the research and lists recommendations for policy and practice.

2. Public accountability in policing: transparency and visibility

Police authorities can only take into account public views if people know that they exist and how to access them. Authorities also need to be transparent and visible in order to account to the public for their own performance. If the public is unaware of authorities' role, it cannot scrutinise how well they oversee the police force. This chapter examines public awareness about mechanisms for participation and accountability in policing. It explores public views on how the role of authorities in community engagement could be improved. Fourteen focus groups were held in England and Wales in order to explore these issues. The views of authorities, forces and other agencies on the public promotion of authorities' role and identity are also discussed.

Views and knowledge of policing

A number of benefits may flow from public knowledge and understanding of policing:

- breakdown of barriers between police and public, which may lead to greater public confidence and co-operation;
- improved access to services;
- more accurate public expectations of services; and
- enabling participation in dialogue about policing, in particular at a more sophisticated level.

Police authorities are responsible for informing the public about the priorities of the local police force and how the police are performing against objectives. However, they are not the only body responsible for providing information about policing or crime prevention, so gaps in knowledge should not be attributed to them alone.

Initially, participants' general views on policing were explored. Participants had low confidence in the police and crime rates were generally perceived to be high. Certain perceptions recurred:

- lack of visible policing, generally equated with foot patrol;
- inaccessibility of police stations and telephone contact;
- the police felt not to have the right priorities;
- police have poor attitude, communication skills and do not treat people with respect;
- minority ethnic groups perceived racial discrimination; and
- police lack integrity.

Constraints on the police's ability to do a good job were thought to be a lack of support from the courts, inadequate legal powers, lack of respect and discipline in society and lack of resources. There were some examples given of positive experiences of the police.

Most participants were not very well informed about local police activities and roles (a non-English-speaking group of Pakistani women had particularly poor access to information). Participants seemed to realise this and to want more information. In so far as people were informed, friends, personal experiences and television were the most important sources. There was low awareness of police consultation activity and very few participants knew of police-public consultation meetings.

Participants were asked what types of information about policing they wanted. There was relatively little interest in information regarding police performance; where there was, the

focus was the local area. There was cynicism over the validity of crime figures and statistics, though there was a demand for information on policing priorities for the local area so that people knew what the police were doing. Again there was some cynicism, with a couple of participants saying that the police should be targeting everything, and that they would not necessarily believe what the police say.

Only a few participants wanted to know how to give their views on how the police force is run, whilst most felt that no one would listen. One subject on which all groups wanted information was the public's rights, most often in relation to being stopped by the police. People from black and minority ethnic groups thought that they were more likely to need this information as they were more likely to be stopped. Several people simply wanted to know how to contact the police for non-emergencies, whilst women in the non-English-speaking group did not know how to access even the emergency services.

A few participants felt that all different types of information should be publicised more proactively and made more accessible. Participants were asked about the leaflet provided with council tax bills, as an example of information on public sector spending and performance with which they were likely to be familiar. While most were aware of it, they did not generally read it or, if they did, take much notice. Their disinterest seemed to stem from the belief that they had to pay the tax anyway and so it did not matter what it was spent on.

Knowledge and awareness of police authorities

It was assumed correctly that participants' knowledge about police authorities would be low. The groups were, therefore, designed to give basic knowledge about authorities before attempting to stimulate discussion. Facilitators used posters with key facts in plain language about police authorities, their roles and functions. There was widespread consensus in the discussion across groups from different ethnic backgrounds, ages, gender and location.

Before facilitators introduced groups to the concept of the police authority, they asked participants who they thought makes decisions about policing. There was a general consensus that the public does not currently have a say in decisions. Participants felt that they had not been asked for their opinions, but most supported the principle of public participation in decision-making:

"You're paying....it's your community, you live there, so you should have a say in how it's policed." (Mixed gender group, 18-29, African-Caribbean, urban, south)

When asked who made decisions about spending and who was responsible for the monitoring of police performance, there was very little spontaneous mention of police authorities. There was much higher recognition of the role of central government, or specifically the Home Office. There was agreement that action should be taken if the police were not doing a good job and many participants thought that an independent body or inquiry should investigate the police in these circumstances. It was common to frame notions of poor performance in terms of wrong doing which should be prosecuted, or punished. People felt that the police, either as an organisation or as individual officers, were not punished strongly enough.

When facilitators introduced the concept of police authorities, the few individuals that had heard of them generally did not know who they were or what they do. The majority of participants thought that the name police authority sounded like 'the police' and most would have assumed they were the same organisation as the force. There was some confusion in the discussion between police authorities and the Police Complaints Authority (PCA). This may have been because some, as discussed above, saw police oversight in terms of dealing with misconduct but the similar names may also contribute to confusion². Public confidence in

² The Police Complaints Authority is to be replaced by the Independent Police Complaints Commission (IPCC) in 2004, which should eventually remove this source of confusion. The creation of the IPCC is part of a reform programme aimed at improving public confidence in the police complaints system.

the police complaints system is low (Warburton et al., forthcoming) so an association with the system may not be to police authorities' advantage.

On hearing about the role and functions of police authorities, most participants thought they were useful and necessary bodies, as long as they were effective. They believed that police authorities could represent the community, communicate public views and priorities, increase public confidence, and generally 'police the police'. One reason given was that the police have a lot of power and need monitoring by an independent body.

"By monitoring the police you see what is good, what needs improving and I think ultimately the community would feel...involved and their voice would be heard more often." (Mixed gender group, African-Caribbean, 60+, urban, south)

Many participants were sceptical about the effectiveness of authorities though, not least because of their low public profile, with many believing that they would have known about them if they were doing a good job.

Studies have shown that public awareness of other organisations with a representational, public participation and regulatory function are limited (National Consumer Council, 2002a, 2002b; Audit Commission, 2003a, 2003b). Participants in the focus groups did have a fairly good grasp of the role of local authorities. This might be expected as they directly provide services. The higher socio-economic groups used bodies such as OFSTED, the Financial Services Authority and school governing bodies as a point of reference in order to understand police authorities. They were more familiar with such bodies than with police authorities.

Views on authorities' independence and communication

Most participants saw police authorities' independence from the police force as very important. This was because of the risk of corruption or abuse of power.

"If it was 100 per cent fully independent, then I think that would make a lot of difference to people, and I think they would feel a lot happier knowing that it was being...kept an eye on." (Female, 18-29, rural, north)

However, there was some concern over how 'independent' was defined and some thought that this needed clarification. Others thought that after training in policing issues was given to members, they might not be independent in the truest sense.

In the light of the importance attached to independence, the appointment and selection of police authority members was deemed a key issue. There were sceptical views about the role of councillors, with some participants viewing them as corrupt and others believing that they have their own priorities and agendas, and might become a police authority member for their own ends. However, participants in two groups did recognise councillors' role in representing the public and thought it a positive factor. Recent research by the Audit Commission (2003a, 2003b) also found that public trust in local authorities is low (and lower than in the police).

Many participants thought that police authorities did not appear to be independent enough, which could undermine community confidence in them. There was a feeling in many groups that the number of independent members should increase or even that authorities should be composed completely of independent members. There were worries that the independent members might not have a fair say, as councillors and magistrates have an overall majority on the authority. Many saw the present system as an 'old boy's network' or a 'closed shop' and thought that 'ordinary people' would not get appointed. Many participants believed that members would all know each other and the police, and were therefore less likely to take action against the police force.

There was a general consensus across the groups that police authorities should publicise themselves, be more visible and communicate with the public more effectively. There was a

view that if police authorities are supposed to represent the public, then the public needs to be aware of their existence and authorities should concentrate on publicising their role (including their consultative function) and their independence. The non-English-speaking group wanted the authority to provide basic information about policing in their own language, for example, how to report a crime or to complain. Participants also wanted basic improvements in communication such as making it easier for them to contact the authority. Most participants believed that the authority needed to involve the public more and listen to their opinions in order to improve services.

Suggestions for publicity methods included television or local newspaper adverts, public meetings, street surveys, public surgeries, reports and posters put in public places or delivered to each house, libraries, public events, youth clubs, bullet points on the sides of carrier bags, representatives at parents' evenings, ballot boxes, use of Internet and e-mail, and roadshows. Above all, participants were keen for authorities to make the effort to get the public's attention and contact them.

"It's always the best thing to come face-to-face, an officer or a member of...the police authority coming out here and listening to our views...and [us] listening to his views and his voice is a lot better than us writing him a letter." (Male, 18-29, Pakistani, urban, north)

Different age groups preferred different methods of publicity and consultation by authorities. The younger groups favoured television, newspapers, the Internet and e-mail. People in the 30-59 age range, and some aged 60 or more, were enthusiastic about public meetings, although some young Pakistani males also had a strong interest in them.

The reasons why participants thought that consultation might be ineffective included public unwillingness to get involved. Some thought that if the police authority did not respond to views, people would lose interest. There was also a lack of confidence about participation, for example, a view that the public may not be qualified to give opinions. It was also thought that people might be put off speaking out in public, either due to lack of confidence or worry about repercussions from the police or others listening.

There are common perceptions about these topics across different sectors. The National Consumer Council (2002a, 2002b) found that people are fairly ambivalent about getting involved in consumer issues and they would be more likely to do so if the issue has a direct personal impact. They also tend to see involvement in terms of making an individual complaint. Some obstacles were similar to those identified in this research, such as scepticism about whether it would make a difference. The Audit Commission (2003a, 2003b) found that people did not feel that public services would listen to their views (although they thought the police were more willing to listen than local authorities, despite the latter being directly elected). It found that independent accountability mechanisms and the provision of information about services were key factors driving levels of trust in public services. The police were rated worst out of three services on providing information.

Authorities' image and identity

Findings from the case studies and survey of authorities help to put the views of members of the public into perspective. It was overwhelmingly the view of respondents in the case study sites that levels of awareness of authorities' existence and role as an independent oversight body were low. Many also thought that the public saw authorities as 'part of the police' and did not understand the relationship between the two bodies. Indeed, some police authority staff and members had been mistaken for police officers when representing the authority and it was said to be very difficult to get the difference across when undertaking consultation.

Police authorities devote relatively few resources to publicity, which may help explain low public awareness. Box 4 shows that it is relatively uncommon for authorities to use TV and radio as publicity methods, or to distribute publicity material to all households.

Box 4 Authorities' publicity mechanisms: survey findings

- *Authority meetings:* The authority must publicise authority meetings in advance. Almost all authorities invited local press or media, and they always or sometimes attended in a large majority. About half of the authorities issued press notices detailing the outcome of meetings but only a small minority always did so. In all but four authorities, it was estimated that five or less members of the public attended authority meetings.
- *General publicity:* The most common method used to publicise authorities' existence, aims and responsibilities was issuing press releases, followed by distributing leaflets. Only two authorities used radio adverts. None had used TV advertising, apart from South Wales, which had experimented with a cable station. Three used no publicity methods at all.
- *The policing plan:* About three-quarters of authorities sent out press notices for the annual plan which is published jointly with the police force and which sets out priorities for the next year. The most common places for authorities to make the plan publicly available, apart from their offices, were libraries and local authority offices. Four authorities sent it out to all households and it was available on the website of all but two authorities that had a site. One authority sent it out with the council tax leaflet. The plan was usually publicised in the local newspaper in about three-quarters of authorities, but by local radio in less than half and local television by only eight authorities. Eight authorities said that the policing plan was not publicised in any medium.
- *The annual report:* This assesses the force's performance but can be used for other publicity purposes. Reports were made publicly available on a very similar basis to the policing plans and, again, they got little media coverage on local TV and radio. Six distributed the annual report to all households, more than in an earlier survey. Only one authority distributed their 1995/6 annual report in this way (CoLPA, 1997). Annual reports may be published as a stand-alone report or jointly with the force. About three-quarters of authorities produced a joint document, about the same proportion as in 1995/6.
- *The Internet:* All but five authorities had websites or pages on the force's website. The remainder were planning to set up sites, all but one within the next twelve months. About half could be contacted by e-mail. Other research on police websites has recommended that, if the force and authority sites are integrated, the police authority information should be easy to find, and if separate, the two sites should be joined up with links in both directions – not all were (SOCITM, 2002). The use of the Internet for consultation and publicity purposes, including the views of the public, is discussed further in Chapter 4.

Joint working with the force or other agencies could make resources available for publicity. For example, North Yorkshire formerly used free publicity only, due to lack of resources. Recently, though, it had a four-page article published in the county council newspaper, distributed to all households. Authorities used the force's publicity machinery to differing degrees. Avon and Somerset, for example, sometimes issued separate press releases, which were thought to promote a separate identity, but used the force's corporate communications if a joint message was desired. South Wales did all its media and communications work through the police force. The MPA sometimes used the Greater London Authority publicity machine, as well as that of the MPS.

Even in the GMPA, which devotes far more resources to community engagement than almost all other authorities and which has had good publicity in certain localities, the public has a poor understanding of what it does. Research for a Best Value review found that while almost two-thirds of the public had heard of the GMPA, over three-quarters did not know what its role was; indicating that while awareness of the authority may be relatively high, understanding can still be low. Increasing both is now a priority action in the GMPA's Performance Improvement Plan.

Many respondents from case study police authorities thought that it was a matter of principle that people should know that there was a body to whom the police service is accountable, which monitors performance and represents their interests. A high public profile could also help the authority to fulfil its consultative role by boosting participation. However, not all respondents thought a high profile was necessary. One reason for this was that the authority facilitates and scrutinises services, rather than provides them directly. A further argument was that authorities have a limited remit, so marketing them might raise expectations which could not be fulfilled.

Views were mixed on whether or not a public identity for the authority (separate to that of the force) was necessary. Some believed that, as an accountability body, the authority should have a distance from the force and that lack of recognition of the authority's role impeded multi-agency working (discussed further in Chapter 3). One respondent also thought that the joint ownership of the policing plan sent a confusing message. Others, though, felt that a separate identity could jeopardise productive working relationships with the force.

Physical co-location or separation from another organisation can send a message about identity. North Yorkshire and the GMPA are based on local authority premises and both tended to be confused with local authorities. Other authorities are based on police force HQ sites. Avon and Somerset considered co-location with the force an advantage, but had started to use a different postal address from the force to convey its own identity.

A few case study respondents felt that the authority's name did not clearly signal its separate and independent identity from the force name. Public statements made by the authority, which either concurred with the force's standpoint on an issue or differed from it, were thought to send a strong message about the authority's independence.

Summary

The focus groups showed that public confidence in the police and levels of knowledge about policing were both poor. These two factors may be related although further research is needed to explore possible links. There was a demand for information about policing, although cynicism and apathy appear barriers to interesting people in information about performance and strategic decision making. If people have confidence that figures are accurate and if they are provided at a very local level, they may be more interested. Awareness of police authorities' role and opportunities for public participation were also low. People thought that authorities potentially played an important role in overseeing the police but doubted their effectiveness due to their low public profile. They thought that publicising themselves should be a priority for authorities. Independence is a second key factor and people will be more likely to express their views if they feel they will be listened to. Building up public confidence about expressing opinions or making them aware of alternative methods of giving views other than in public meetings might also encourage participation. The research also demonstrated that it is possible to engage the public in discussing fairly sophisticated issues of police accountability and governance. The case study research showed that forces and authorities are well aware of the low public profile of police authorities. While allocation of resources are one constraint on raising authorities' profiles, not all respondents were convinced of the need for authorities to increase public awareness or to have a public image which would clearly signal independence from the force.

3. Police authorities' approaches to consultation

This chapter considers the broad approaches which police authorities take to consulting the public, based on the case studies. It discusses how authorities see the aims of consultation, their approaches to working jointly with the force and other agencies and considers the role of police authority members in the authority's consultative function.

Aims of consultation

Consultation can be carried out for many different reasons. The stakeholders in consultation, such as police forces, police authorities, CDRPs and the public, may not necessarily have the same aims (Elliott and Nicholls, 1996; Jones and Newburn, 2001). For example, while forces and authorities may want to inform the public about constraints on policing or to identify strategic priorities, the public may wish to get the police to act on immediate local concerns. Police authorities must consult to fulfil certain statutory purposes (see Box 2), but the legislation does not prevent authorities from seeking to achieve additional aims.

In the survey of police authorities, respondents most frequently said that 'identifying local policing priorities' was the most important aim of consultation, followed by 'increasing local accountability' and 'identifying local issues'. Other aims – such as eliciting support or co-operation from the public, identifying local issues, assessing/measuring local problems and identifying methods for tackling them – were less important.

For respondents from authorities in the case study sites, the main aims of consultation were:

- to feed into priorities and planning – some respondents noted that this was a statutory responsibility;
- to inform and educate the public about policing;
- to ensure that services are responsive to users' needs and to improve services;
- to obtain co-operation and partnership in preventing crime, for example, by using consultation as intelligence and getting the public's ideas on crime prevention; and
- to promote good police-community relationships (in particular amongst young people) by breaking down barriers, allowing people to have direct contact with officers, providing an opportunity for the police to be visible, or acting as a safety valve.

However, it was fairly common for respondents in the case study authorities to define the aims of consultation in very general terms, for example, 'getting public views on policing', 'finding out the public's concerns' and 'identifying issues and problems', without specifying how feedback was to be used. In contrast to the survey findings, strengthening accountability was rarely explicitly mentioned. A few respondents saw the police force as the decision-makers, and the role of consultation to influence the force. There was little difference in how the case study authorities envisaged the aims of consultation. However, only three, West Yorkshire, Avon and Somerset and the GMPA gave improving police-community relations as a specific aim. In the case of West Yorkshire and the GMPA, this may reflect relatively recent civil disorder in certain districts in their areas.

Respondents from police forces saw consultation in similar terms to authorities. However, they emphasised more explicitly the use of public feedback as a performance management tool, used to set standards that reflect customers' expectations and to monitor service delivery. One problem previously recognised in relation to designing consultation exercises is that the differing aims of partners have not always been acknowledged (Jones and Newburn, 2001). The case study research reveals that police authorities and forces have many common consultation and engagement aims, but also some distinct requirements.

In the research with the public, discussed in Chapter 2, participants said that the main reasons for authorities to consult were to improve services and become more visible.

How authorities make decisions about consultation

Decisions about what consultation to undertake and when (if not how) were to some degree governed by authorities' statutory responsibilities. Consultation could also be externally instigated. The Lawrence Steering Group³ asked authorities in 2001 to consult on the recording of police stops and North Yorkshire police authority, in particular, felt that this request made the authority realise its traditional consultation mechanisms were inadequate for such an exercise. In the GMPA, the Ritchie Committee, which reported on civil disturbances in Oldham, asked the police authority to consult with young people on its behalf.

The case study authorities had different structures for making decisions about consultation. Several examples of very flexible working and devolved decision-making were discovered. However, this was not always seen to facilitate successful public engagement; some element of co-ordination of consultation mechanisms can be seen as desirable.

The MPA and GMPA had a police authority committee responsible for consultation at a strategic level. These oversaw consultation strategy and planning, reviewed methods and considered the results. North Yorkshire was setting up a similar community engagement board. In West Yorkshire, a working party, which shared views rather than took decisions, had replaced the committee. South Wales had a 'Community Leadership Group', which met quarterly at member level and received reports on, amongst other topics, community consultation.

Local empowerment can allow consultation to be tailored to an area's needs. In Avon and Somerset, decision-making was entirely vested in district level Community Consultation Planners (see Box 5). The authority's Best Value and Consultation Committee oversaw feedback from consultation rather than deciding what consultation should be done. One member interviewed very much preferred being able to cater for specific local areas rather than adhering to a rigid 'one size fits all' approach. Several respondents emphasised, though, the importance of the co-ordinating role played by the joint force/authority staff member, and the fact that each district had to present an annual consultation plan to the police authority.

Other authorities also empowered local areas to some extent. For example, GMPA community consultation workers had a wide degree of flexibility in relation to their role and although this was seen as an advantage, some expressed a view that they would appreciate more direction from the authority, especially in terms of identifying which issues should be regarded as a priority. In West Yorkshire there appeared little co-ordination from the centre of the authority. Members had complete autonomy over consultation in their geographical area, which had some advantages. In the Kirklees district, flexibility had allowed regular public forums to be merged with local authority forums and such innovative ideas can be easier to pilot if change does not have to occur 'across the board'. However, this approach can also lead to inertia and in some districts forums had been abandoned and nothing had been put in their place:

"There's nobody here at the authority that's actually reined them in and said 'hang on, you've got an area like [X], why haven't you done anything there?'" (Police authority staff, West Yorkshire)

A lack co-ordination within an authority can be less problematic if there is an officer with a remit for co-ordinating consultation within the corresponding police force.

³ The Home Secretary's group responsible for ensuring that the recommendations of the Stephen Lawrence Inquiry are implemented.

Relationship between forces and authorities

Forces also carry out their own consultation and past research has found problems of co-ordination and duplication between force and authority (Jones and Newburn, 2001). Joint working may happen at a number of stages:

- producing strategies and planning for consultation;
- carrying out consultation exercises;
- feeding back the results of consultation to the other agency(ies) and the public; and
- ensuring that it influences the planning process and other decision-making.

There were some common features to the approaches of the case study authorities. In terms of actually undertaking consultation, all authorities ran public meetings attended by force representatives and authorities generally worked with force survey units to do surveys or had access to the results. There was also joint working at the strategic level, with forces being represented on the aforementioned authority committees which oversaw consultation.

In North Yorkshire, the MPA and South Wales joint Best Value reviews had considered both force and authority consultation arrangements together, whilst Avon and Somerset had carried out a similar review outside the framework of Best Value. The MPA and South Wales had draft joint consultation strategies. There was some variance, though, in the degree of joint working between sites. In South Wales, West Yorkshire, the MPA and GMPA, there was a high level of joint working. However, there was less collaboration in North Yorkshire, although the recent Best Value review recommended closer co-ordination so this may change.

Box 5 The Avon and Somerset model

Avon and Somerset Police Authority interpreted their statutory obligation to consult to be to ensure that consultation takes place in their force area. It had therefore empowered the force to undertake consultation, whilst retaining the power to request specific consultation if it perceived a need. Since 2001, each policing district had a Community Consultation Planner (CCP) which designed a programme tailored to its needs. The CCPs consisted of the District Commander, sector inspectors, two police authority members, local authority representatives and the community safety officer. Police authority involvement was primarily through members who were linked to district(s). Most authority funding for consultation was switched to the force and the Consultation and Knowledge Centre Manager, a joint appointment between force and authority, played a pivotal role. She advised the force on consultation methods and fed back outcomes from the CCPs to the force and the police authority, in order to inform budget planning and the policing plan. Common problems were identified across the force area to be dealt with on a strategic, force-wide basis and both sides generally felt this arrangement worked well. The police force had been keen to see the previous PCCG-based system, which they perceived to be ineffective, change. Force representatives felt that they had a pretty free hand in developing consultation methods and saw the authority's role as monitoring that it was being done properly. However, the degree of police officers' commitment to consultation – which they integrated into their daily jobs – varied.

In general, problems of duplication or overlap between force and authority were relatively infrequent. However, it may be very difficult, especially in a large force area, even for the force itself to have a full picture of all consultation that occurs. In West and North Yorkshire, there was a feeling that not all information gained from consultation was shared. It was also reported from West Yorkshire that there were tensions between authority members and the force over consultation. West Yorkshire police had a 'Planning and Consultation Manager' in an attempt to minimise these problems; North Yorkshire police force/authority joint Best Value review recommended a similar post be created there.

Generally, police authorities saw considerable benefit to joint working. Collaboration allowed the sharing of information, from databases of contacts to the results of consultation exercises. Saving money was another advantage. Preventing duplication and consultation overload, and

the promotion of 'joined up thinking' were also cited as good reasons for joint working. It was also generally considered an advantage to have police officers at public meetings, for a number of reasons, for example:

- the public had a chance to question officers;
- they gave the meeting credibility and had the expertise needed to answer questions; and
- both authority and force got the same message from the public at the same time, preventing misunderstandings.

One potential disadvantage of joint public consultation meetings, though, was that people may not speak freely in the presence of police officers or may be intimidated by them. Respondents in an area with a history of community tensions said that it was not always productive to have officers initially at a consultation exercise and that they were not always wanted at events.

“People did not want to speak direct to police officers and didn’t see any point in that. And obviously we have got a role to play there to....break down some of these barriers but initially you have to respect that.” (Police authority staff, GMPA)

There were arguments in favour of authorities’ working independently on occasion. For example, one respondent in the MPA thought that in sensitive areas (for example, stop and search and deaths in custody) the authority should be seen to work independently, while keeping the force informed, as this approach would gain public trust. A view was also expressed in North Yorkshire (where there were relatively high levels of separate working) that while collaboration had advantages, it was necessary to remember that the authority was holding the force to account. None of the authority respondents from Avon and Somerset, however, thought that empowering the force to consult compromised its independence or ability to hold the force to account.

Police forces saw similar practical advantages to joint working – avoiding duplication, consultation overload and fatigue, and enabling economies of scale and information sharing. Just as authority respondents thought working with the force gave them more status with the public, the view of a force respondent was that joint work with the authority could confer greater credibility and independence. In Avon and Somerset, where the enthusiasm of officers for consulting on behalf of the authority varies, the latter's backing gave this activity more clout inside the force too:

“We probably wouldn't do consultation without the police authority guiding and steering us.” (Police force, Avon and Somerset)

The main disadvantage to joint working from a force perspective was that the two bodies had slightly different agendas and that collaboration could lengthen the timescale for consultation.

Multi-agency working

The issue of joint versus separate force and authority working has been to some degree overtaken by the advent of multi-agency consultation, following the Crime and Disorder Act (1998). In most case study sites, the degree to which consultation was carried out on a multi-agency basis varied widely between different districts within the authority's area. Reasons for this included political and territorial factors, and the strength of the local CDRP.

There were formal mechanisms to ensure systematic multi-agency work (see Box 2). In Avon and Somerset, for example, the Community Consultation Planner in each district included a representative of the CDRP. In both North and West Yorkshire, the authority's public consultation meetings had merged with the equivalent local authority forums, but only in certain districts – in other areas there had been resistance. A similar framework existed in Merthyr Tydfil in South Wales. Authorities also used mechanisms led by other agencies for

co-ordinating consultation plans and pooling the results (e.g., strategy groups and consultation databases).

Box 6 Multi-agency working in the GMPA and MPA

In the GMPA, the authority's eleven Community Consultative Workers (CCWs) were linked to individual boroughs and were located at their offices. Each had a consultation plan taking into account the activities of the force and CDRP. In one borough, Oldham, the CCW and youth consultation workers had carried out joint working aimed at promoting community cohesion with young people (see Box 15, Chapter 5). A new multi-agency community safety unit was being established in Oldham and the police authority consultation workers were to have a key role in the unit, bringing in the public's views to directly inform its work. Several multi-agency working groups in the GMPA focused on themes such as disability, older people and women's issues and domestic violence. They promoted consultation with interest groups perceived to be more isolated, shared expertise and brought together agencies to prevent duplication.

The MPA carried out a wide range of multi-agency consultation. It was part of a consultation structure encompassing related bodies such as the Greater London Assembly (GLA) and Transport for London. Voluntary organisations were represented on the MPA committee overseeing consultation. Examples of joint working included a survey sent out on the authority's behalf by the Association of London Government on the impact of community and race relations training in eight boroughs. The London Civic Forum, which represented a thousand voluntary organisations in London, has also carried out consultation for the MPA (for example, facilitating faith group meetings). The MPA proposed to base its future pan-London consultation on working through other agencies.

Authority members, especially those representing local authorities, were an important factor in multi-agency work. Councillors formed a personal link between police and local authorities and may also have been on the local CDRP – though it could be a matter of chance whether a particular area had a link with an authority member committed to multi-agency work. Police authorities were not represented consistently on CDRPs nor were the councillors nominated to the CDRP necessarily the same as those appointed to the police authority.

There were many examples of individual multi-agency consultation exercises such as roadshows, the use of citizens' panels run by or with other agencies and joint consultation on the budget with local authorities. Such events had had varying degrees of success, which may have depended on factors other than whether they were jointly run. There were examples of CDRPs and authorities contributing resources in cash or kind to each other's consultation.

Generally, most respondents were positive about multi-agency consultation and some were great enthusiasts. There was broad agreement amongst authorities, forces and other stakeholders about the advantages and disadvantages. As with force-authority joint working, major benefits were the prevention of duplication and consultation overload and sharing information and resources. Others included:

- it opened up access to 'hard-to-hear' groups, as some people might feel more comfortable dealing with agencies other than the police;
- voluntary organisations can provide accessible and neutral venues, advise on suitable consultation methods and ways of communicating that are meaningful to particular audiences;
- partnership with other organisations, especially if they inspire trust and confidence, adds to the authority's credibility – as the authority itself is generally not well known;
- it made it possible to address holistically the public's concerns, which cut across the boundaries of responsibility of several agencies, and also demonstrates to the public that crime is not just a police issue;

- agencies are seen to work together – it was suggested that this breeds public confidence;
- partners bring a range of perspectives, understanding and interpretation, which gives a broader picture (such as an awareness of unintended impacts on other services);
- it forges relationships and can bring disharmonised groups together; and
- it brings in a more representative audience to public meetings so people who come to talk about a local environmental problem, for example, will get involved in discussing policing.

There were drawbacks to multi-agency working, some similar to those encountered with joint force-authority working. Perceived disadvantages often seemed to derive from the need for agencies to relinquish some control. Multi-agency working could also make consultation more complicated, requiring more time for organisation, which could offset some of the advantages of resource sharing. One respondent summed up the two approaches by saying that *'it is easier to do it as a single agency, but multi-agency is better'*.

A problem frequently cited was that agencies work to different timescales. The police tend to move quickly while voluntary organisations need long lead-in times. This had led to some frustrations on both sides. The other main difficulty was that agencies had different agendas, which had to be combined in one public meeting or survey. This could lead to organisations feeling that their interests had been squeezed out, or that focus and clarity was lost. A joint exercise might give the public less opportunity to develop an understanding of a single topic.

Barriers to successful multi-agency working were similar to those identified in other research (Phillips et al., 2002). These included:

- the reluctance of some agencies to get involved (in particular, health services);
- political differences and motivations;
- the desire of individuals to retain leadership and to get credit;
- unwillingness to share information and data protection issues;
- desire to protect budgets; and
- a dependence on informal contacts which lapsed if individuals moved on.

A further barrier was agencies' confusion about police authorities' role. Partners were not aware of what authorities could offer – or of their limitations. Police authority staff in the GMPA said that they were not invited to meetings *'because they [agencies] think that if the police [force] are here, then they have invited us'*. In one authority, CDRPs were said to take the view that they would prefer to deal directly with the force.

Suggested keys to successful partnership working were good personal relationships and convincing partners that they will benefit. Authorities' new status on CDRPs is intended to lead to improvements and some of the case study authorities were starting to consider the implications for consultation.

The role of police authority members

The members of the case study authorities played a significant role in consultation. They defined themselves in broad terms as custodians of the authority's consultation role and of the principle that police services should serve the public and respond to its views. Members' specific roles included:

- being linked to one or more districts and having some responsibility for consultation in those districts – they could have considerable autonomy;
- personally undertaking consultation or representing the authority at consultation events – in most authorities members chaired the regular public meetings in their link areas and

councillor members also hold surgeries and attend council meetings – members were also said to informally 'keep an ear to the ground';

- having links to and exchanging public feedback with local authorities, CDRPs, Local Strategic Partnerships and voluntary and community organisations;
- acting as a conduit between the force and the authority, engaging in dialogue with the district commander at a local level, and with senior officers at authority level; and
- helping shape the authority's consultation by contributing ideas and exerting influence at a more strategic level, for example, by sitting on committees overseeing consultation.

It was commonly felt across the six authorities that members varied widely in how active they were in carrying out their consultation role; some were extremely proactive, others barely visible. Variation was generally thought to be due to how individuals chose to interpret their role and to their personal commitment (or otherwise) to consultation. One respondent commented that *'unfortunately it does seem to come down to personalities rather than being written into the contract'*. The extent of members' additional commitments could also be a factor.

There did not seem to be an association between commitment to consultation and type of member (councillor, independent, magistrate). However, there were divergent views about whether different types of member played their roles in the same way. One opinion was that non-councillors did not have equal mechanisms for public contact, representation or accountability or that they did not see it as their role to engage in the community in the same way. Others argued that non-councillors also had methods for community engagement, such as their role on CDRPs, voluntary or community organisations or through informal contacts. Views also differed on councillors' involvement in local politics; whilst their knowledge of the political process could be an advantage, they could also have political agendas and less available time.

The contribution made by active members was generally welcomed. Respondents from forces and CDRPs gave examples of members in all categories whom they saw as effective: they were supportive, interested, committed and enthusiastic. One force representative said that they could get across a message to the public that officers could not. Some were thought to represent local feelings reasonably well, but there was some scepticism about the extent to which members consistently represented public views.

Suggestions were made about how members' roles in consultation could be enhanced and some authorities were considering how best to address this issue. One area for development was members' knowledge and experience. Suggested remedies were joint training with officers; visits to see operational policing at first hand and audits of members' interests and skills on joining (in order to utilise them best in consultation). Avon and Somerset are to address the variation in activity levels by training new members in consultation. North Yorkshire also plans to expand members' community leadership role, including training, following its recent Best Value review.

Summary

Forces and authorities see the aims of consultation in similar terms, but the former emphasised more its role in performance management. There are considerable advantages to the authority of joint working on consultation with the force (including sharing of resources) and much evidence of joint working was found. However, consultation separate from the force was recognised to be advantageous in some circumstances. There did not appear to be widespread duplication or overlap between forces and authorities although there was a feeling in some authorities that they were not fully aware of all force activity. Consultation by police authorities now, in any event, reflects a strong push towards multi-agency working. Respondents were generally enthusiastic about partnership working, despite some potential drawbacks. Authorities' new role on CDRPs should make multi-agency working more

systematic. Authority members could play significant roles in consultation and could accelerate or slow down change. Authorities were considering how to develop further links with CDRPs and how to achieve a more consistent involvement by members in consultation.

4. Methods of consultation and their effectiveness

The survey findings revealed that police authorities used a variety of methods to engage with the public. Authorities were asked if they had used a range of consultation methods and, for each that they had utilised, how effective they felt the method to be. The traditional public meeting was still the main form of consultation for many authorities, but other methods had increasingly been adopted. Surveys were also used by the majority of authorities and over half has used focus groups.

Table 1 – Police authorities' perceived effectiveness of consultation methods¹

	No. of authorities that used method	No. of authorities that felt method to be 'very' effective ²	No. of authorities that felt method to be 'fairly' effective ²
PCCG-style meetings	34	-	18
Surveys	35	9	24
Focus groups	23	10	11
Depth-interviews	12	5	7
Citizens' juries	5	2	3
Citizens' panels	19	3	12
Other public meetings	28	8	14

Notes:

1. Survey respondents were asked how effective they thought the individual methods used by their authority were for 'consulting the public about policing'.
2. Based on the number of authorities that said they used the method.

Some authorities had also begun to utilise innovative electronic consultation methods, though this was not well developed.

This chapter will draw on evidence from both the survey and case studies to outline and evaluate current methods and structures for engagement used by authorities. It will then specifically evaluate authorities' success in engaging with minority ethnic and other so-called 'hard-to-hear' groups.

Consultation methods

Public meetings

Home Office (non-statutory) guidance after the *Police and Criminal Evidence Act (1984)* recommended that police authorities set up Police Community Consultative Groups (PCCGs) to satisfy their requirement to consult the public. Although there is still no statutory obligation to run PCCGs specifically, eight out of 42 authorities had retained them whilst a further 26 used similar or identical meetings called by a different name. Eight authorities had abandoned PCCG-style meetings altogether. The survey of authorities showed PCCG-style meetings are almost always attended by Divisional Commanders of the respective police force and by local beat officers.

PCCG-style meetings have been examined in-depth in previous Home Office research (see Elliott and Nicholls, 1996). The present study echoes previous criticisms of this form of consultation but found examples of where, given the right area and conditions, PCCG-style public meetings can still achieve certain engagement aims.

PCCG-style public meetings:	
Criticisms	Uses
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> meetings are often poorly attended – large turn-outs are only usually secured if there is a current issue of genuine local interest, such as a community incident or the proposed closure of a police station 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> they are a mechanism whereby the public can 'let off steam' by confronting senior police officers face-to-face about issues that are important to them and hold them 'personally' to account
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> attendees are not representative of the whole community and tend to be white, middle class and aged over 40 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> they can be seen to break down barriers between the police and public, by allowing direct interaction with officers
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> meetings tend to be dominated by an operational policing agenda 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> they can be used for providing the public with information about policing and also for gathering intelligence on criminal activity in localities
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> issues raised tend to be repetitive and very localised in focus and it is difficult to use meetings as a consultation mechanism for strategic or longer term priorities 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> they are still the preferred method of consultation for certain, more traditional, types of people who resist engaging with more innovative methods

Generally, it appeared that police authorities had recognised the limitations of PCCG-style meetings – of the 34 authorities that still ran such meetings, no survey respondents considered them to be 'very effective', though 18 said they felt the meetings were 'fairly effective'. It was not possible from the survey data to discern what aims survey respondents felt the meetings were fairly effective in achieving.

There was evidence from the case studies that some authorities had attempted structural and organisational reforms to the PCCG structure. Avon and Somerset, for example, had introduced a flexible planning approach to consultation, empowering the force to undertake consultation exercises with the authority playing a more strategic role (see Box 5). The requirement for one public meeting per district per year was retained as a 'failsafe', and many public meetings did occur, but in practice the formal PCCG structure had been completely abandoned. Members had attempted to engage the traditionalist PCCG audience, opposed to the changes, in alternative consultation exercises.

Box 7 North Yorkshire Police Authority and a multi-agency approach

North Yorkshire Police Authority re-structured its 'Community and Policing' (CaP) groups in the mid-1990s, introducing a two-tier system of locally based groups feeding information up to more strategic tier-one groups. The system was not as successful as had been hoped and it was recognised that there was a degree of duplication between tier-two CaP groups and the district council area forums. These have since been merged in some districts, with recognisable benefits associated with a multi-agency approach (see Chapter 3). The authority is pressing for this multi-agency model in all districts and its recent Best Value review has also concluded more generally that reliance on CaP groups as the sole or main form of public consultation is out-dated and inadequate. The review proposes a range of tailored consultation mechanisms to appeal to different groups within the population.

Box 8 West Yorkshire Police Authority and 'district-wide' consultation events

West Yorkshire Police Authority had taken a flexible approach to using their 'Police and Community Forums' – if they were perceived as servicing a consultation need they were retained, otherwise they were reduced. In one district they had been abandoned in favour of other consultation initiatives. A fresh approach had been adopted in some districts to consulting on policing and strategic priorities. In 1997/98 the authority undertook an experiment in the Bradford division and staged a large consultation event, using personal invitations to encourage a high turn-out. Attendees were members of other agencies, the local business community and anybody recognised as representing a particular group or interest. The event was facilitated and included focus groups and workshops of ten to 20 people. Questions and topics for debate were agreed between the authority and the force. The event had since been replicated in Bradford, Wakefield and Calderdale districts, all involving a hundred or more attendees. The information generated on priorities was collated by the authority's Community Consultation Officers and sent directly to the force Planning and Consultation Manager.

Box 9 South Wales Police Authority and 'going out to the public'

South Wales Police Authority conducted a joint Best Value review of consultation with the force in 2000, with the help of consultants from Cardiff Business School. As a result, PCCG-style meetings were reduced to two per division per year, focusing specifically on the budget in January and policing priorities in the autumn. The authority then mainly attempted to fulfil its consultation responsibilities by 'going out to the public'; with a strategy of attending meetings arranged by other stakeholders (e.g., Crime and Disorder Leadership Groups organised by the CDRP and Neighbourhood Watch Association meetings) and holding surgeries in mobile police stations. Authority members had also undertaken structured questionnaires outside shops and support from the force meant there was an added benefit of visible police presence in shopping areas. It was not clear from evidence collected during the case study as to whether this system was proving more successful than the traditional PCCG structure. However, the structure had not been in place long and one view was that the authority was still 'finding its way' in relation to the new arrangements.

Overall, from the case study research, it appeared that authorities had had mixed success with either reforming or replacing PCCGs. Avon and Somerset had one of the clearest strategies in place for filling the vacuum left by abandoning groups. North Yorkshire also had a clear strategy emerging from their best value review, though this had yet to be implemented. In other areas, there had been partial success and frustration. In West Yorkshire, for example, change had been piecemeal. District-wide consultation had been effective in consulting on priorities, but had not been introduced in all districts. Forums had been abandoned in the Bradford district, but it was felt by some within the authority that they had not really been replaced with a more effective set of consultation mechanisms, leaving a partial vacuum.

Implementation of the strategy to replace the PCCG network in South Wales had also been rather patchy. However, the introduction of a 'consultation calendar' to co-ordinate consultation activity had been relatively recent. In London, the MPA had sought to reform the PCCG network, but had thus far met resistance from some members and from some PCCG organisers and attendees. In GMPA, PCCG-style meetings were now called 'Public Voice on Policing' (PVPs) and the number of meetings per district per year had been reduced. Whilst attempts had been made to make the meetings more proactive, with the involvement of authority members and representatives from the local authority's crime and disorder units, this had not been as successful as originally envisaged.

Increasing the effectiveness of public meetings

In areas where PCCG-style forums are not performing well, there are ways in which meetings can be altered to encourage greater participation. Examples were found of breaking meetings up into syndicates and using flip-charts and facilitation to focus the discussion on

priorities for at least part of the meeting. This approach was attempted by West Yorkshire Police Authority and was very successful in one half of a district, but a failure in the other half due to one meeting containing people who favoured a more traditional agenda-based format. A similar exercise of using 'break-out sessions' in public meetings in Avon and Somerset was also perceived as having mixed success. This emphasises the importance of tailoring methods to suit the specific consultation audience.

There is evidence from the United States that police authorities could do more to improve community participation in public meetings. Skogan et al. (2002) evaluated public involvement in community policing in Chicago, where there are regular problem-solving public meetings. They found that there was very high awareness of the meetings (80 per cent of the adult population had heard of them) due to an aggressive city-wide marketing campaign and that 14 per cent of adults had attended at least one meeting. Although television advertising was the principal force in raising awareness, the research concluded that community factors and personal contacts played the largest role in stimulating participation. They also found that participants who networked with each other were more likely to attend frequently and become involved in other activities and this interaction was encouraged at meetings via 'phone trees' and making time for tea and coffee.

The Chicago beat meetings shared many of the aforementioned weaknesses of PCCGs, so further problem-solving training for police officers and civilian facilitators was provided. Training was also provided on how to run effective meetings. This was a factor mentioned by staff in GMPA who attend PVPs. One observed that the local councillors would often try and use the meetings to further their political agendas and that meeting chairs should be trained in ways of preventing this occurring.

Elliott and Nicholls, in their 1996 study, found that all police authorities used PCCGs and that most adhered closely to the Home Office guidance of 1985 that recommended these meetings be the principal form of public consultation. The present study suggests that authorities have made considerable progress since then (although change has not been across all authorities). The pre-eminence of public meetings had declined in many authority areas and PCCG style meetings had been abandoned altogether in others. Elliott and Nicholls recommended that police authorities should utilise a range of different methods to achieve their consultation and engagement aims. The following sections will show how some authorities did use a much wider range of consultation methods and that some authorities had also embraced the notion of consulting people on their own terms, as opposed to expecting people to come and be consulted on the authority's terms.

Outreach methods

A message that came across reasonably strongly from both 'open-ended' questions in the survey and from some case-study interviews was that the public are most often successfully engaged on their own terms:

"So thinking about innovative – where are your people and what's the best way of getting to them...your consultation may have to be held in a whole range of different places." (Police authority staff, MPA)

"The thing that's come through to me is that you don't expect people to come to you to consult." (Police force, West Yorkshire)

The case study research revealed some good examples of 'outreach' consultation methods that have been used. GMPA had undertaken a great deal of outreach consultation. They had both community consultation workers and youth consultation workers based in districts of the authority and also had member-chaired, multi-agency working groups dedicated to engaging with hard-to-hear groups. The Disability Issues Working Group had made a genuine effort to go out to people who say they have a particular policing issue and had been approached to involve disabled people in role-play scenarios as part of the training of probationer police officers. The Older People's Working Group had also been involved in outreach consultation and consultation workers had facilitated 'intergenerational' workshops involving older and

young people in an attempt to break down barriers between the groups and discover more about their needs and concerns.

Box 10 Successful outreach: Pontefract college youth consultation and drama workshops

West Yorkshire Police Authority, in conjunction with the force, undertook successful outreach consultation in schools in the Pontefract area. An initial seminar was held at New College, Pontefract in October 2001; designed to involve young people in the consultation process, find out what their priorities are and improve communication generally. During the seminar, young people volunteered to participate in a crime and community safety project. This eventually involved the volunteers producing a drama workshop on bullying and presenting this at a number of junior schools (bullying on the grounds of different cultural appearance was one issue highlighted in the initial seminar). All parties involved considered the exercise to be a success. There was positive feedback from both the young people involved in the producing the drama workshops and the children to whom they performed them. The authority consultation officers also felt the work to be successful, especially in terms of breaking down barriers between the authority, the force and the young people involved. (<http://www.wypa.org/Consult/pontyouth.htm>)

Box 11 Successful outreach: Avon and Somerset mobile police station

Avon and Somerset Police Authority had benefited from ongoing consultation undertaken using a community contact vehicle, or mobile police station. This vehicle toured around and was parked in places specifically chosen to be highly visible and that would attract a representative cross-section of the public – such as supermarket car parks. A visit by the vehicle, which was occupied by two or three police officers, special constables or support staff, was also publicised in the local press and on local radio. Officers then engaged the public by providing information and answering questions and also handed out questionnaires for the public to fill in. The consultation was part-funded by the crime and disorder partnerships, which also provided tamper-proof tax discs, that would usually cost about fifty-pence. There is a feeling in some parts of Avon and Somerset that the contact vehicle had been a success, the high visibility of the method meant that a far higher percentage of the public now realised consultation occurred than when the authority relied solely on PCCGs. However, there is evidence to suggest that the impact of this type of consultation might be variable and linked to the commitment of the particular officers undertaking it.

The Metropolitan Police Authority had used outreach methods, but these had been focused on raising the profile of the authority as opposed to engaging the public directly in consultation. MPA staff had visited gay bars and venues to hand out MPA contact details and questionnaires and had also identified barber shops and hair salons as ideal places to conduct outreach work in certain communities.

Places and events that are suitable for outreach consultation will vary according to the type of area the authority covers. A handful of rural authorities in the initial survey mentioned that they utilised 'country shows' as a way of engaging with a large section of their communities. Again, this tended to involve the authority having its own stall at the show with promotional material and questionnaires to hand out and collect. Members and staff could also generally meet and chat to members of the public at the events.

Market research methods

The survey of authorities revealed that market research methods (surveys, focus groups, citizens' panels and juries) were most often done either jointly with the force or solely by the force, with the authority benefiting from viewing the results. There were some examples of surveys and focus groups conducted solely by the authority. There were also examples of authorities participating in joint market research-style consultation with other partners, such as local authorities or voluntary organisations.

Thirty-five out of the forty-two participating authorities said they had used surveys to consult the public. Surveys can be used to ask about specific priorities or aspects of service, providing more of a focus than is sometimes possible in a public meeting. The main advantage of quantitative methods such as surveys, is that they can obtain the views of a large number of people, representative of the population, on a range of issues. If well designed and administered, surveys can provide robust trends in, for example, satisfaction with police services. Only two authorities considered surveys to be 'not very effective' as a form of consultation, though only nine considered them to be 'very effective'. Although in many instances responsibility and expertise for surveys lies within the force, it is often possible for authorities to influence the content of questionnaires and get them to serve their purposes.

Box 12 Innovation: Northumbria Police Authority survey of all households

Northumbria Police Authority in recent years had sent a leaflet called 'Your View Counts' to every household and business in the authority area (approximately 635,000 leaflets). The leaflet contained a detachable ranking exercise on priorities which people were asked to complete, seal and return (postage paid). There was also space for general written comments. Residents could also complete the survey on the authority website and e-mail comments to a named authority staff member. The results of the survey were analysed by an external research agency. This year, the authority received about 28,000 responses to the questionnaire including 50 online responses, an increase from the previous year. Approximately ten e-mails were received from people raising further concerns.

Although sending something to every household is not a cheap form of consultation (the cost was approximately £80,000), the authority nevertheless regards it as cost-effective. This is because as well as the feedback from the questionnaire, the leaflet that accompanied it served as a means of raising the profile of the authority. The leaflet also advertised other services provided by the authority, such as the availability of large print versions, a minicom service for the deaf and a FreeCall telephone number, which was a service purchased by the authority and run for a month after distribution of the leaflet. The FreeCall number was advertised in seven different languages on the back of the leaflet. As a result, the authority received two requests for the leaflet and questionnaire to be translated into both French and Mandarin and there were 18 responses to the questionnaire via the FreeCall number.

Citizens' panels had been attempted by 19 authorities. These panels consist of numerous volunteers who agree to be consulted periodically on a range of issues. Various methods (such as surveys) can be used, but sub-samples of panels can also be taken for specific issues. Due perhaps to the higher costs associated with this method, citizens' panels were often a joint or multi-agency venture. Only three of the 19 authorities felt citizens' panels to be 'very effective' in consulting the public about policing – which could perhaps be a result of problems associated with multi-agency working (see Chapter 3). Twelve survey respondents did consider them to be fairly effective. There was a large citizens' panel in the Avon and Somerset area (Somerset Influence, with approximately 5000 members) which the authority had utilised in conjunction with CDRPs in relation to crime and disorder issues. The method was seen as successful as far as it went, but it failed to solve the issue of engaging hard-to-hear groups. The survey respondent from Avon and Somerset rated citizens' panels overall as 'not very effective' in consulting the public about policing.

Other research methods, such as focus groups and citizens' juries, can be used for different consultation aims. They are more useful for exploring a particular issue or set of issues in greater depth, or for exploring the views of a specifically targeted section of the community. Elliott and Nicholls found few examples of police authorities or forces using focus groups to consult the public (1996:30). In the present study, focus groups were considered the most effective market research method used by authorities for consultation. Of the 23 authorities that had adopted this method, ten regarded them as 'very effective' and eleven as 'fairly effective'. North Yorkshire Police Authority had also used focus groups in relation to assessing the effectiveness of their overall consultation strategy. From their database of previous consultation participants, they invited people to participate in discussions of how well

the authority's consultation mechanisms work and what improvements could be made for the future.

Citizens' juries are composed of far fewer participants than citizens' panels (often twelve to 16) selected to be representative of the population or a sub-group within it. Jurors are informed about a particular topic and receive evidence from 'expert' witnesses. Jurors can spend up to four days considering their responses to the issue(s) and sessions are often professionally facilitated. Only five authorities had been involved with citizens' juries, due perhaps to the fact that they are even more resource-intensive than citizens' panels.

Electronic methods

Use of 'electronic' consultation methods (such as e-mail, interactive web-based forums) was in its infancy. Although 20 out of 42 authorities claimed to have undertaken some form of electronic public consultation, the nature of this varied. The survey found no examples of authorities, for example, having a fully interactive consultation forum as a part of their website⁴. Tellingly, of the 20 authorities to have used electronic methods, no survey respondents said the authority found them very effective in consulting the public about policing and only nine said they thought they were fairly effective.

Generally speaking, authorities were well represented on the Internet. Only five out of 42 authorities had no Internet presence at all, the remainder had either their own website or a page or pages on the force website. Examples were found of authorities soliciting e-mail comments from the public on certain issues (e-mail letterboxes).

The case-study authorities were generally in the process of considering electronic consultation as opposed to conducting it regularly. Avon and Somerset and the MPA had both made use of online surveys (on the respective force websites) and South Wales had experimented with 'RingMaster' (a system of sending telephone messages to a database of contacts) which they hoped to extend to e-mail. Avon and Somerset were also developing a pilot to use text-messaging to consult with young people. At least half of the case study authorities expressed a desire to have fully interactive websites, but none had started to develop this.

Box 13 Innovation: 'Who Wants To Be a Millionaire' interactive voting consultation

A handful of authorities had successfully piloted the use of interactive voting equipment – similar to the technology used on the quiz show 'Who Wants to be a Millionaire?' – for various purposes; such as identifying local policing priorities and engaging with young people. The equipment comprises a laptop computer, screen and hand-held voting pads. Questions are programmed into the computer and then displayed on the screen. Participants can then vote for answer options using the pads. The number of participants will depend on how many voting pads are available; the case-study research discovered events with up to 150 participants.

This technology has several advantages as a form of consultation. Firstly, it is interactive and helps to engage participants. As voting is confidential, it gives each participant an equal voice and the session is not dominated by the most vociferous people. Results of the voting can be displayed instantly on the screen, stimulating further debate around the issues, and extra questions can also be inserted during the session in response to issues arising. The main barrier to adopting this technology is the start-up cost – purchasing the equipment costs around £50,000. However, in North Yorkshire this cost was shared among the eight crime and disorder partnerships. A jointly facilitated exercise was undertaken by the authority and the force as part of the joint best value review of consultation. This involved two sessions with young people at a school. Both facilitators felt the consultation was very successful and a good way of engaging young people. Some interviewees stressed the importance of well trained people using the equipment, both in terms of operation and suitability for purpose.

⁴ Internet-based fora can be designed so that members of the public (or a specified group of stakeholders) can read and view the responses of all participants and then engage in dialogue with other users on issues.

Although there is great potential for using electronic methods, as with any other method authorities should not see them as a panacea for public engagement. Authorities are encouraged to embrace the Internet, in particular, but it should be remembered that Internet access for the public is still reasonably restricted to more affluent sections of the population. Indeed, the MPA found the responses to their online consultation heavily biased towards white, middle-aged males.

Participants in the focus groups with members of the public were asked if they had heard of or used police websites – there was not widespread awareness. Amongst those with access to the Internet (about half the participants), only one had visited a police website, while another knew that such a website existed (the discussion did not distinguish between force or authority websites). Only a small minority said they would use them to look for information. There were several reasons for participants' unwillingness to use police websites. Most said that cost was the main factor, others lack of time or that they only used the Internet for specific things. Some thought that they would receive as poor a response from sending an e-mail to the police as they had on the telephone in the past. Suggestions for increasing use included advertising the website via links with other sites and making it 'eye-catching'. Most participants, whether or not they had Internet access themselves, thought that many people would not have access and that information should not therefore appear on the Internet only.

Elliott and Nicholls made no mention of electronic consultation methods in their 1996 study. So, despite activity in this area being at an early stage, authorities can be seen to have made a big step forward. There also appeared, from the case study research, to be wide enough interest in embracing electronic consultation techniques for there to be more progress in the near future. Inevitably, some people are more open to embracing such innovations than others, especially among authority members. We would, though, expect more and more authorities to be experimenting with and fully implementing electronic consultation methods in the near future.

Engaging with 'hard-to-hear' groups

Previous Home Office research has recognised problems with the term 'hard-to-reach' groups, in that it has 'a wide range of meanings and applications' (Jones and Newburn, 2001:vii) and is potentially stigmatising. Many people now prefer the term 'hard-to-hear' groups, arguing that access should not really be a problem. Examples of such groups, as provided in guidance for community safety partnerships under the Crime and Disorder Act (1998), are 'young men, the homeless, drug users, the gay community, members of minority ethnic communities, children, those who suffer domestic abuse and the elderly' (op.cit.7).

In the survey, authorities were asked whether they had attempted to engage with any 'minority/hard-to-reach groups' and also to specify how successful they had been in engaging with specific groups. Thirty-five out of 42 authorities said they had made some attempt to encourage communication and participation in the consultation process among minority or hard-to-hear groups. The most common groups engaged with were minority ethnic groups and young people (28 authorities) and gay and lesbian groups (21 authorities). Authorities were asked to rate on a scale of one to five how successful they felt their engagement had been with each specific group identified. The perceptions of success varied enormously and very few authorities considered that they had been successful across the board. Many authorities felt they had been very successful in engaging with one or two specific groups, whilst others had attempted to engage with more than one group with limited success. It was not possible, within the scope of the survey, to probe for success factors and barriers to effective engagement.

Table 2 – Number of authorities that had attempted to engage specific hard-to-hear groups

Hard-to-hear group	Number of authorities that have attempted to engage ¹
Minority ethnic	28
Gay/lesbian	21
Homeless	10
Travellers	9
Young people	28
Older people	14
Unemployed	6
Disabled	10
Refugees	4

Notes:

1. Base consists of the 35 authorities that said they had attempted to engage hard-to-hear groups.

The survey also included questions about whether authorities made public meetings and other consultation events as accessible as possible. Twenty-seven authorities said that they always held public meetings in buildings equipped with wheelchair access, whilst 13 said 'sometimes'. Fewer authorities (five) said they always held meetings in buildings with sound enhancement/induction loop systems, while a further 25 said 'sometimes'. GMPA liaised with a local authority access officer who advised them on making public meetings fully accessible to all sections of the community. The access officer provided meeting organisers with checklists and ensured that information was made available in a variety of formats, which can be seen as good practice.

Evidence of successful engagement with hard-to-hear groups varied very much between the case study authorities. West Yorkshire, GMPA and the MPA perhaps demonstrated the most effective engagement. As well as the Minorities Police Liaison Committee (see Box 14) and work with young people (see Box 10) West Yorkshire Police Authority participated in the Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual and Transgender Policing Initiative which grew partly out of outreach work conducted by members of the force in gay bars and venues.

GMPA had also made successful efforts to engage with hard-to-hear groups. A good example was multi-agency outreach work in response to community tensions in the Oldham district (see Box 15) and the disability issues and older people's working groups mentioned earlier. The disability issues working group specifically influenced the design of new police stations in some areas. The MPA had co-opted a member of the London Refugee Council on to their consultation committee and also two representatives of youth organisations. They had also invited a representative of the London Civic Forum (an umbrella organisation of around a thousand voluntary organisations) to attend the committee meetings. Voluntary organisations can provide crucial access to hard-to-hear groups and the Civic Forum have provided the MPA with access to various faith groups in London. MPA staff and members also had regular meetings with representatives of groups and organisations representing older people.

Although both West Yorkshire and the MPA had been relatively successful in engaging hard-to-hear groups, their strategies for doing so differed. The MPA had a structured approach, having identified eight key hard-to-hear groups that were usually under-represented in the consultation process. The authority then attempted to specifically engage these chosen groups. Although the general approach in the MPA was structured, they did make use of alternative or opportunistic methods – they had exploited the opportunity to have publicity links on the radio station 'Choice FM' and a recent public meeting on gun crime was well publicised. Pirate radio stations were also utilised as a way of publicising the event to specific communities.

The approach in West Yorkshire appeared to be less structured:

“I would work with anybody who came to me because they wanted to, meet their group or talk but one of my key things, I target areas where I don’t think anything is happening.” (Police force, West Yorkshire)

It also appeared that the force mostly took the lead in terms of consulting with hard-to-hear groups in West Yorkshire. One force representative involved in the consultation process believed there was a reason for this:

“I think it’s basically down to their resources again because it’s such an – it’s an odd area to get into because you have to respond very quickly to somebody saying that they want you and you’ve got to be ready to just go and do it. The police authority are booked up kind of months in advance with the events that they have to do.” (Police force, West Yorkshire)

Although there may well be occasions when flexibility is required to engage with hard-to-hear groups, there are inherent drawbacks to a totally ad hoc approach. There is a wider issue associated with (lack of) feedback to participants of consultation (see Chapter 6) which can be accentuated in relation to hard-to-hear groups.

The issue of planning ties in with that of feedback and can be particularly relevant to accessing hard-to-hear groups. If community leaders and organisations representing hard-to-hear groups are not made aware of authorities’ consultation strategies or timetables, then it can be difficult to mobilise participants. ‘Short notice’ consultation also helps to reflect the image of consultation not being part of a continual engagement likely to promote real change:

“what happens is officers realise they have some boxes to tick and they need to consult with certain groups and there will be a quick phone call and a could you possibly bring some together and usually that happens within a very short time frame and that’s problematic because firstly it confirms the community’s perspective that they aren’t given enough time, resources or notice and it’s difficult from our perspective as well to pull together a good quality event in three weeks...we are bringing together whoever would be free on that day rather than an ideal list of stakeholders.” (Voluntary sector representative)

MPA staff highlighted the fact that often short notice consultation is necessary though and this can often be in relation to issues affecting hard-to-hear groups. Mention was made of a plan to have a specific consultation group for this purpose, made up of representatives of various interests, who could be called upon to provide a view from their communities at short notice.

Box 14 Minorities Police Liaison Committee (Bradford, West Yorkshire)

West Yorkshire Police Authority were providing administrative support to the multi-faith Minorities Police Liaison Committee in the Bradford district. The committee received Home Office funding as part of the ‘Connecting Communities’ project and this had enabled them to undertake outreach work and a series of workshop-based seminars on police-community relations. The divisional commander was extremely positive about the role of the committee. Although it was acknowledged that it had been more successful in some aspects of its original remit than others, it was recognised as valuable to the force in relation to both operational policing and community relations. The committee were of particular use at times of unrest, where they could use their influence to defuse situations. However, some concern was raised by an authority representative as to what extent members of the committee truly represented their communities and succeeded in cascading information to them. The committee had also helped to run high profile recruitment events for West Yorkshire police, persuading potential recruits and their families that a career in the police is desirable and West Yorkshire police said they had noticed an increase in applications from minority ethnic communities as a result. The committee had also run ‘mentoring and support’ sessions to prepare minority ethnic applicants for police assessment centres.

Summary

This study confirmed findings from previous research concerning the weaknesses of PCCG-style public meetings. Police authorities had moved on from their position in the mid-1990s and were relying less on this form of consultation. There was also evidence of increased use of outreach consultation, market research methods and, most recently, innovative electronic forms of consultation. However, the extent to which authorities had reformed the PCCG structure and embraced alternative methods was very variable.

The extent to which police authorities engaged with hard-to-hear groups was also variable, both between and within authorities. Often, the process of attempting to engage with these groups seemed opportunistic as opposed to structured.

5.

Making an impact

Previous chapters have examined ways of reaching a wide cross-section of the public and then generating a meaningful public response to policing issues. This chapter examines what impact police authority consultation has on achieving the different aims identified in Chapter 3 and what benefits resulted. It was difficult at times to distinguish between the force's and the authority's activity but, wherever possible, the authority's contribution has been identified.

Following consultation through

In order for consultation to make an impact, effective channels are necessary in order to feed back the results to the authority and force. In the case study sites, police authorities fed back to the force in a number of ways:

- informal and local dialogue with borough commanders and local officers;
- authority meetings and committees attended by senior force staff;
- reports or minutes of consultation are sent to the force; and
- dialogue between authority and force staff.

The case study authorities had specific mechanisms for feeding back the output of consultation into the process for drafting the policing plan (a joint exercise between force and authority). For example, in West Yorkshire, the results from districts are pulled into a composite report which informs the policing plan working party, on which both members and senior officers from the force sit. A similar process takes place at divisional level.

Impact on the policing plan and strategic decisions

It is police authorities' statutory responsibility to take account of public views in setting local policing priorities. In the survey of police authorities, identifying local priorities was most commonly thought to be the most important aim of consultation. Most authorities thought that consultation had some influence on the policing plan – only about a quarter said that it had a lot of influence, while three said that it had very little. In the case study sites, authorities thought that consultation had some impact on the policing plan and strategic decisions and force respondents corroborated this view. Examples of different types of impact were:

- *The allocation of funds to specific services as a result of public feedback* – in South Wales, the authority funded call-handling centres at a total cost of £600,000.
- *Ensuring the plans reflected local public priorities* – consultation helped to identify issues which were then adopted as priorities; for example, in Avon and Somerset, speeding and call-handling. In the same authority, anti-social behaviour and low level criminality, improved accessibility and visibility, violent crimes and drugs were mentioned as issues included in the plan as a result of consultation. In the MPA, the emphasis given to police visibility in the plan was cited; and that vehicle crime might not be included in this year's plan as it is not a priority for Londoners, despite being a national priority. Another example in the MPA was the inclusion of road deaths in the plan, an issue which campaigning groups had argued should take higher priority. In West Yorkshire, consultation had resulted in gay people as vulnerable victims being included in the plan. In North Yorkshire, anti-social behaviour had been incorporated as a priority by the authority, before it was adopted as a national priority. In South Wales, low level nuisance and anti-social behaviour were prioritised as a result of consultation. This led to reassurance and quality of life issues being built into plans. The priority of drugs had been boosted even more highly as a result of public concern.
- *Giving legitimacy to budget decisions* – a force respondent in North Yorkshire saw the budget roadshow as giving public consent to increasing the council tax contribution to policing. Otherwise, budget cuts would have had a severe impact in rural areas.

Despite these impacts, some respondents in authorities expressed the view that the impact on plans was limited. For example, one authority member in South Wales thought that consultation moderated the setting of targets rather than decided them. In Avon and Somerset, one staff member felt that major changes had not been made because feedback tended to be at a micro rather than a macro level. It was also fairly frequent for respondents to state in general terms that consultation had had an impact on strategic decisions but the number of specific examples they gave was limited.

There are a number of reasons why impact may not be clear – including the increased emphasis on national priorities mentioned earlier. It may also take some time for the impact of strategic decisions to become apparent. Awareness about how consultation affects the policing plan and decision-making may also be low (particularly within forces and external organisations, but perhaps even within authorities). Respondents in one force, for example, did not seem clear about how force-level strategic decisions were taken and of the role of consultation in this. This suggests that authorities should clearly identify and communicate how consultation impacts on strategic decision-making.

As noted in Chapter 2, research with members of the public showed many thought that the police's priorities did not reflect their own. There could be a number of explanations. There may actually be a gap between police and public priorities, for reasons already discussed. However, the public may not be fully aware of what police priorities are, suggesting a failure of communication. There may also be conflicting priorities amongst the public; many participants in the focus groups, for example, thought the police disproportionately targeted motorists. However, other sections of the public may see traffic offences as serious.

Performance management and quality of service

There was some evidence of police authorities in the case study sites using consultation to improve performance management and quality of service. It can be difficult to distinguish between impact on quality of service and on strategic priorities and spending decisions, as a desire to improve the former fed into the latter. The need to improve call-handling was raised across all six authorities as an issue arising from consultation and, in two authorities, through complaints as well. Authorities had, as a result, focused on achieving improvements in this area and felt they had achieved some success.

Additional examples were given of improvements to performance and quality of services at a local level, generally concerning accessibility and visibility. In Avon and Somerset, a police station front desk was being staffed more frequently for a pilot period in response to public demand. In Oldham, in the GMPA, consultation by the authority identified the need for a community beat officer following the disturbances in 2001. As a result, a local police officer was provided (see Box 15). The GMPA's disability working group had advised on the design of new police stations to ensure accessibility to people with disabilities. In North Yorkshire, consultation had had an impact on station opening times and retaining staffing in rural areas. There was less evidence of impact on local issues in the MPA than in other authorities but this may be because PCCGs deal with these issues at borough level rather than the authority itself.

Improving police-community relations

There was a view in the case study authorities that consultation improves the relationship between the police and the public and respondents from forces and other agencies shared this opinion. Many such comments were phrased in general terms but respondents also cited specific examples of consultation being successful in improving relations.

Three authorities (Avon and Somerset, West Yorkshire and the GMPA) had specified that improving police-community relations was one of their aims in consultation and there was more evidence from these three of an impact in this area. In Avon and Somerset it was universally felt that the police now seemed to be more willing to reach out to the public. An authority member gave an example of a public meeting which had helped to diffuse

community tensions over a sex offender being kept at the local station. Both authority and force in West Yorkshire thought that youth consultation had improved relations and a respondent from the force also thought that the minorities liaison committee had been very successful (see Box 14). The strongest evidence about impact in this area came from the GMPA. The authority felt that its work, both through the thematic working groups and that of its team of community and youth consultation workers, had considerable success in building up trust and confidence, and in reducing tensions. Respondents from other organisations also held this view. More detail about this work in one borough is given in Box 17 (below).

In South Wales, an authority member cited an event with lesbian and gay groups which had helped to bring down barriers. A view from the force was that the authority 'prodded and probed' to ensure that the divisional commander was on top of the community relations job. There was some division within the MPA as to how successfully PCCGs fostered better police-community relations in London. One view was that they achieved their original aim of improving relations. An example was given by a police officer of how, as a result of the activities of a PCCG in one borough, the MPS handled a police shooting incident more sensitively. The PCCG had also improved public understanding of the police. However, another view within the authority was that it should not be assumed that PCCGs improved relationships – *'simple interaction doesn't do it'*. Consultation did not appear to have had an impact on police-community relations in North Yorkshire but community tensions were perceived to be relatively rare.

Consultation was said to achieve better relations in a number of ways, principally by:

- giving the public an opportunity to vent their feelings and feel listened to;
- changing officers' attitudes and making them more confident about venturing onto other people's turf, such as youth and community centres;
- improving the police's understanding of the public's concerns;
- educating the public, increasing their understanding of policing and correcting misinformation – this was said to make people appreciate the police's difficulties and constraints, promote realistic expectations and increase public satisfaction;
- reducing tensions – this included reducing tension between different sections of the public, such as young and older people, or different ethnic groups, as well as between police and public; and
- mobilising the public to participate in crime prevention (see below).

Box 15 Police community relations and community cohesion: GMPA (Oldham Borough)

In light of disturbances in 2001, the GMPA and the force had made attempts to improve police-community relations and also to break down barriers between groups and reduce tensions. One example was an event aimed at improving community cohesion. Two-hundred and fifty young people attended a local police training centre and were put in mixed groups with officers. The groups did workshops on drugs, police attitudes and team-building skills. Other local agencies such as the Fire Service were also involved. Other events included football matches between the local police officers and local youths and a visit to a 999 control room. The visit aimed to answer questions about response times that had arisen at a public meeting and it aided young people's understanding of how calls are prioritised and the pressures which staff were under. This information was then fed back into the rest of the community. The police authority was perceived as having a major impact in improving police-community relations in the borough. The events provided an opportunity for young people to meet outside of confrontational situations. Force and authority had a good relationship in the area and the youth consultation worker followed up issues from consultation with the divisional commander.

Crime reduction

Seeking the co-operation of the public in preventing crime is one of the statutory purposes of police authorities. Respondents from both forces and authorities gave examples of intelligence gained through consultation, either directly at public meetings or as a result of improved police-community relationships. Local problems about prostitution and speeding were brought to the attention of the police. Consultation with diverse groups was said to have led to the receipt of intelligence ordinarily unavailable. In West Yorkshire, links with the gay and lesbian community led to information about local murders. In Avon and Somerset, information was given to police officers about drug dealers at a consultation meeting. In the same authority, police came to a local community centre in Bristol to appeal for witnesses after a murder. Although there was little response, it was a sign of police confidence that they were willing to come onto the community's territory. Consultation also led to public participation in crime reduction. For example, in Avon and Somerset, a Speedwatch scheme was set up where people were given speed guns and trained to provide evidence for the police. In West Yorkshire, consultation led to the use of 'park up points', that is, a mobile police vehicle where people can report crime. This was intended to alleviate concerns about going to the police station and other traditional crime-reporting methods. Despite these examples, evidence of direct impact on crime reduction was limited.

Other impacts

There have been other impacts of consultation. In the GMPA and West Yorkshire, consultation was perceived to have helped with recruitment of minority ethnic groups to the police service. The minorities' liaison committee in West Yorkshire (which is supported by the police authority) helped directly with recruitment fairs, but consultation was also thought to facilitate trust and confidence, leading to recruitment enquiries.

"It's bearing fruit as we speak...it does seem we are getting more people actually applying." (Police force, West Yorkshire)

The results of consultation also fed into the improvement of the consultation process itself. For example, when disabled people in Greater Manchester were asked how they wanted to be consulted, they opted for local rather than central consultation, improving its effectiveness in the eyes of the 'customer'. A better public understanding of policing, as a result of participation, could result in improved quality feedback or more focused choices. Consultation was seen by some as having a symbolic value, regardless of whether it achieved any concrete results. The police were seen to be accountable to the public at meetings.

Summary

The extent to which the benefits of consultation can be measured was limited by the fact that authorities did not generally clearly track how feedback is translated into strategic choices or service improvements. There were examples of consultation influencing policing priorities, but impact was limited by a number of constraints, notably the need to balance public views with other factors. There were also examples of impact on quality of service, mainly at a local level. Perhaps the area where consultation appeared to have the greatest influence was on police-community relations, which may reflect the inclusion in the case studies of three authorities giving this aim particular priority.

6. Overcoming barriers to successful engagement

There are several potential barriers to successful public engagement by police authorities. Two key elements to successful engagement are, firstly, achieving a good quality response from a representative cross-section of the population and, secondly, ensuring that this response actually has an impact on decision-making and service delivery. This chapter considers potential barriers to both these elements and, where appropriate, makes suggestions as to how authorities may overcome these barriers.

Barriers to successfully engaging the public

Consultation overload and public apathy

The present research found that police authorities believed a combination of public apathy and 'consultation overload' or 'fatigue' was a huge barrier to them successfully engaging the public. In the survey, approximately half of authorities suggested either 'lack of interest', 'public apathy' or 'consultation fatigue' when asked an open-ended question on what they considered were the barriers to successful engagement. There are two (linked) issues. Firstly, the general public are not widely involved in consultation undertaken by authorities and this was often interpreted as 'apathy'. Some case study respondents thought the proliferation of consultation that had taken place in recent years could be responsible for this:

"There's so much going on in the public sector and then there's all the stuff, the market research, going on in the private sector as well, it's just complete overload."
(Police force, West Yorkshire)

Another exacerbating factor suggested by one respondent is the fact that some agencies that newly acquired a duty to consult tended to do so without carefully considering their strategies or methods. So, not only can there be a lot of consultation occurring, there can also be a lot of 'bad' consultation:

"So you've got a plethora of absolutely abysmal documents going through people's doors which are putting them off from engaging." (Police force, West Yorkshire)

Evidence from focus group research with the public, though, suggested the case for public apathy may be overstated (see Chapter 2) and also some ways for overcoming it.

The second issue concerns people who *have* been involved in the consultation process, especially those who represent minority or hard-to-hear groups. These individuals tended to be called upon regularly to give their views, often by different agencies and on similar topics – consultation overload. The logical solution to the problem of consultation overload would be to tackle the issue of lack of public involvement and provide a wider pool of potential consultees.

Feedback

One suggestion to improve and maintain participation in consultation concerns providing the public with adequate feedback from consultation exercises. Several case study respondents saw lack of adequate feedback to consultation participants as contributing to the problem of maintaining their participation:

"I think the problem can often be that consultation raises expectations and then if the expectations are not delivered, people get cynical." (PCCG administrator, MPA)

"People feel that they're sick of being consulted, they don't believe that consultation leads to anything." (Police authority member, North Yorkshire)

Feedback to consultation participants about what has been said and about the outcomes of consultation can have a number of benefits. It can actually improve the quality of consultation by increasing awareness beyond local concerns and encouraging people to think about long-term priorities, as well as managing the public's fear of crime and expectations (Elliott and Nicholls, 1996). Evidently, public expectations reflected through consultation can often be unrealistic. There was a general feeling that authorities could play a greater role, through improved feedback mechanisms, of either highlighting where consultation had led to change and improvement or explaining why this had not occurred. If people do not perceive that their personal contribution has been relevant, or if a lack of change is not adequately explained to them, disillusionment with the process can set in:

“A lot of their attitude is ‘well, we’ve already told you what we want, we’ve already told you what’s not been done, you’re still not doing it so what’s the point of us telling you again’.” (Police authority staff, West Yorkshire)

There was a common view across the case study areas that authorities did not feed information back to consultees or to the general public as well as they could. The main forms of feedback to the general public were the policing plan, annual report and press releases from both authority and force. There were occasional examples of authorities attempting to develop more on-going relationships with consultees (see Box 16), as recommended in previous research (Jones and Newburn, 2001). The reasons for the hit and miss nature of feedback was attributed to organisational factors such as a lack of documentation of how consultation translates into decision-making and feedback getting lost in bureaucracy. In general, respondents were aware of the importance of improving this aspect of consultation. However, occasionally respondents in authorities cast doubt on the need to do so.

Box 16 Feedback: Greater Manchester Police Authority

In the GMPA, people attending Public Voice on Policing (PVP) forums were invited to join a database in order to receive feedback in the form of minutes of the meeting. The use of alternative formats such as newsletters to participants had been carried out in particular consultation exercises, such as an inter-generational event between young and older people in one of the boroughs. In addition, a youth worker at a community centre stated that the centre fed information back to the community it served. The Disability Working Group had developed a database of disability groups for on-going involvement. It was also part of the police authority staff role to feed back information. However, they were not always aware themselves of what the impact of consultation was on decision-making.

Multi-agency working

Multi-agency working is also an obvious solution to the problem of consultation overload and is discussed in detail in Chapter 3. The most promising approaches detected in the case studies were those in districts in West and North Yorkshire and in South Wales, where police authority public meetings had been combined with (or replaced by) local authority forums covering similar issues; so as to avoid the same people having to attend separate meetings on similar themes. It was suggested that shared questionnaires and other market research methods can also be advantageous, if agencies can overcome the problems of shared funding and what issues to cover:

“You can bet your bottom dollar that nine out of ten will go in the bin so if you just did one, that was good, then perhaps that might be more effective.” (Police force, North Yorkshire)

One authority member and a local authority representative interviewed in Avon and Somerset felt that their system of multi-agency planning (see Chapter 3) helped to overcome the problem of consultation overload.

Money, resources and whether consultation is a priority

Only six authorities cited lack of money and/or resources when asked in the survey what the main problems with their consultation exercises were. However, the majority of those interviewed in the case study research cited money and resources as being a barrier to successful engagement with the public. The issues can be separated into those surrounding:

Money – it was felt that adopting either specific innovative consultation mechanisms (such as an interactive Internet forum), or a range of different consultation mechanisms tailored to specific groups, was expensive. Certainly, any such methods were considered more expensive than merely relying on occasional public meetings as your consultation mechanism.

“The reason why the Authority has in the past put its eggs in one basket and run a network of [PCCG] groups is, almost without exception from the authority point of view, it is solely based on voluntary effort. Now if you want to put together a basket of consultation mechanisms designed to reach individual members of our society that is going to cost an enormous amount more money than running 40 odd groups based on somebody saying ‘all right, let’s go and organise a meeting for you’.” (Police authority staff, North Yorkshire)

There was also a general view that buying the services of professional research agencies was expensive and authorities often felt that they were unable to access skills and resources that they would have ideally liked to. This is unfortunate as there was evidence from the case studies that often authorities’ own surveys, in particular, suffer from the same problem as public meetings, in that participation is heavily biased towards white, middle-aged males. Professional research agencies can ensure all groups in the community are represented in surveys and they also often have access to hard-to-hear groups (for recruiting focus groups) and provide trained facilitators to ensure the exercise produces the desired outputs.

In many authority areas, expertise relating to market research methods, and in particular surveys, lies within the force; and closer working relationships with the force is one way for authorities to benefit from this. However, the authority does need to have in place adequate mechanisms for ensuring that it receives complete feedback from the force in a form that enables it to be most effectively used.

Time and staff resources – the numbers of authority staff dedicated to consultation varied significantly between case study areas. GMPA employed between 15 and 20 staff who had some involvement in consultation. In particular, they had five dedicated youth consultation workers and eleven community consultation workers. The benefits of these levels of resources could be seen in several districts, notably Oldham where youth consultation workers had been successful in fostering better community relations since the civil disturbances (see Box 17).

Other authorities had fewer staff resources to draw on and this was definitely perceived as a barrier. West Yorkshire police authority had only three community consultation posts, one of which had been vacant for a few months. Staff felt they would have been able to achieve far more if the vacant post was filled and also if less of their time was spent administrating their police-community forum meetings. North Yorkshire Police Authority had only recently appointed a consultation worker having previously had only ‘one-and-a-half’ staff members involved in engagement and this was also cited as a barrier.

There is also the issue as to whether consultation is ‘high priority’ for the authority as a whole. This seemed to be influenced greatly by the attitudes of members. Members were generally perceived to have varying attitudes towards consultation, with some being very committed and others less so (see Chapter 3). However, commitment from members does not necessarily guarantee that money and resources will be made available for consultation:

“We are now looking at a [large] shortfall at the budget and we are going to struggle...I would hate to see us dropping consultation but if comes down to the

choice of having sufficient bobbies on the beat or whether you are actually finding out if they are doing a good job or not I think the community at large would be saying we want the bobbies and we will soon tell you if they are not doing their job properly, we will write to you or ring you up – you don't need to spend money on consulting with us.” (Police authority member, North Yorkshire)

The view that money and resources are a barrier to successful engagement was not shared by all those interviewed. One independent authority member in Avon and Somerset expressed the view that resources are not necessarily a barrier – if there is a will to adopt innovative methods then it can be achieved. Another member of the same authority believed successful engagement was being achieved with very few resources. However, it should be noted that a Chief Superintendent in the same area believed that the force were undertaking the majority of consultation and that this was definitely a drain on resources that could be used for operational policing.

With the upgrading of their involvement in the crime and disorder partnerships, it is easy to see an argument for police authorities to increasingly take a more strategic and co-ordinating role, which would enable authorities with fewer resources to add value to the wider consultation process. Authorities could help tackle some of the aforementioned barriers to multi-agency working, helping agencies avoid duplication and maximise resources.

“I think one advantage would be for them to provide a clearer role in issues like public consultation...I think there is an opportunity there for the police authority to play a role in drawing everybody into a similar approach.” (Local authority staff, West Yorkshire)

Adopting a more strategic role would not, of course, preclude authorities with greater resources undertaking their own consultation if it were perceived that there were a specific need.

Box 17 Innovations prevented due to lack of resources: West Yorkshire Police Authority

Internet consultation forum – the authority were very interested in having an interactive consultation forum on their website. These can be issue-based or policy-based and designed to allow people to respond to proposals online, view the comments of other participants and engage with other participants in dialogue. The cost of setting this up was prohibitive (£20,000 was cited by one interviewee) and it would also have involved a large amount of staff time to monitor and analyse the data. The idea has not yet been pursued.

Youth consultation in schools – Community Consultation Officers ran a successful programme of outreach consultation in schools in Pontefract (see Box 10). The authority were approached by other schools and colleges impressed with the scheme and asked if it could be replicated. This had yet to happen due to lack of staff time to devote to this type of work.

Publicity ‘video wall’ – the authority were approached by a television company in Bradford who were interested in setting up a video wall to promote authority activities. The authority were unable to find funds to contribute to the cost of the screen.

Training and skills

There is evidence from the case studies that consultation exercises were often more likely to achieve their aims if they were undertaken by trained staff (for example, district-wide consultation events in West Yorkshire were run by consultation officers who are trained facilitators; Greater Manchester police force only allowed officers trained in the use of interactive voting technology to have access to it). North Yorkshire Police Authority staff acknowledged that there would be limited value in collecting large amounts of data for themselves as they had no staff trained in data analysis techniques. There was a similar feeling in GMPA, where staff said they would benefit from more training in relation to social research methodology and in relation to diversity issues:

“Things like, I might say the wrong terminology or something...because I’ve had no training on that. I am working with people who you might offend.” (Police authority staff, GMPA).

Staff in GMPA acknowledged that they could individually request to go on training courses, but said there was no structured approach to training. In particular, there was a lack of basic familiarisation with the role of the police authority and the force:

“I think, as a relatively new person, an induction to all that sort of thing. I started on a Monday and that afternoon I was in Manchester. I thought I would get a couple of weeks induction into how the police authority works and then a couple of weeks in Manchester. It just wasn’t like that, I was there that day.” (Police authority staff, GMPA)

There was a view from more than one case study authority that lack of research methodology and particularly analysis skills could stop authorities from making the most of data that they either collected themselves or received from other sources.

Use of good practice

There is a large body of literature on good practice in consultation already in existence, including previous Home Office reports. During the case study research, interviewees were specifically prompted on whether they had heard of (and, if so, made use of) any good practice literature.

Awareness of good practice literature among case study respondents was mixed. Generally speaking, ‘consultation officers’ or those responsible for undertaking or co-ordinating consultation within authorities (and forces) were aware of the existence of good practice publications. Several police authority members were also aware of some literature, but some claimed not to be aware of any. However, although many respondents said they were aware of the existence of literature, several could not identify specific publications. Some were aware that there were, for example, ‘Home Office reports’, but had not read them in any detail. Relatively few respondents indicated that they had thoroughly read either a wide range of guidance, or specific reports and that this guidance had assisted them in their work. Few respondents gave any real concrete examples of how they had used the good practice literature already in existence.

“I wouldn’t say that anything from them has been used by the authority in implementing anything or trying to change anything.” (Police authority staff, West Yorkshire)

It is possible to surmise from the fact that several respondents were aware of, or possessed, good practice literature without acknowledging its influence that the report format is not accessible to many people. Although some respondents appeared to have engaged with the report format, there was a sense that much literature is left to gather dust on bookshelves, perhaps after an initial reading. One force member in South Wales recommended making literature as simple as possible, as rank and file officers only really want to see a ‘top-ten’ of ‘how it works’.

Some authority members also expressed concerns over the report-based format. In the MPA, one member commented that there appear to be ‘fifty-five different versions’ of consultation guidelines and that a distilled version would be desirable. A force representative in Avon and Somerset also commented that he questions a lot of good practice as it appears ‘regurgitated’. A member in North Yorkshire favoured bite-sized chunks of guidance that could be e-mailed to interested parties.

There has perhaps been a lack of good practice guidelines specifically focused on police authorities and public engagement. The Home Office are currently facilitating the establishment of a national practitioner panel, consisting principally of individuals involved in,

and with personal experience of, public engagement in police authorities and forces, in order to address this need. The aim is for the panel to generate a knowledge base of good practice for dissemination to authorities and forces in an accessible format. The panel will also seek to foster networking at a national level in relation to citizen-focused policing issues.

Local politics

“There’s often a lot of political relationships that limit what we can do...so that’s a barrier for us.” (Police authority staff, West Yorkshire)

Local factors, in particular intra- and inter-agency politics, can act as barriers to effective engagement in two principal ways: change and innovation can be resisted, or made difficult in practical terms; and multi-agency working can be frustrated or made less effective.

In three of the case study areas strong evidence was found for local politics affecting the ability of the police authority to engage in effective consultation, or at least affecting its ability to operate the consultation mechanisms it would favour. In North Yorkshire, this was largely attributed to continuing ‘fall-out’ from local government re-structuring during the mid-1990s, with some local authorities associating the police authority with the district councils and being reluctant to co-operate with them.

In another case study area, there was also evidence of some local authorities being more prepared to co-operate with the police authority than others. Often this was directly attributed to inter-agency politics and personalities:

“I mean certainly in the [X] area it is a, I would say a personality clash, definitely a personality clash between our authority member and the leader of the council. I mean the leader of the council is not the sort of person who you turn to and say ‘you will do this’ and the personality of the member involved in it is to say ‘you will do this!’ – and basically, he just doesn’t like it...”

“...because we’re talking openly here and no names are going to be recorded, meetings have been held with...[X] council...and they don’t want to work with us. Much of that was to do with the relationship that their leader had with our previous chairman.” (Police authority staff)

Where successful multi-agency consultation had occurred in this area, it had sometimes been the result of informal working relationships. Authority staff mentioned using their own contacts that had built up over time in order to gain entry to other agencies via the ‘back door’.

Perhaps the greatest amount of intra- and inter-agency politics was to be found in the MPA. This is maybe not surprising, due to the relative newness of the MPA and also the other recent changes in London politics, such as the formation of the Greater London Authority (GLA) and election of the Mayor and the emergence of other agencies such as Transport for London. Both the MPA members interviewed cited party political differences as a barrier to multi-agency working. One described a situation where joint working is precluded by a Labour-controlled local authority and Conservative-dominated PCCG not co-operating with each other.

Local politics can clearly act as a barrier to effective public engagement. It can be argued that the onus is on police authority members to try and broker good working relations with other agencies and stakeholders to ensure that opportunities for multi-agency working are not lost.

Organisational framework and leadership

Chapter 3 revealed how there were varying approaches to implementing consultation strategies and exercises across case study authorities and that the precise degree of flexibility and co-ordination can act as a barrier to successful engagement. Some respondents

in both the case study interviews and the survey lamented lack of co-ordination and guidance from central government in relation to 'who should be doing what' in terms of consultation. There is a perception that several agencies now exist with statutory requirements to consult around similar issues and that clearer guidance could help prevent unnecessary overlaps. Representatives from crime and disorder partnerships that were interviewed also claimed to have received little or no guidance from central government about how they should be consulting (despite the existence of guidance which the Home Office has produced). One commented that they believed the police authority could fulfil this co-ordinating role:

"I think there is an opportunity there for the police authority to play a role in drawing everybody into a similar approach, to be able to compare on a regional and sub-regional level..."

...I would see their role in the future...as being one of a co-ordinating role, a more strategic role, in providing people with the guidance on how to consult, of how to get the best things back." (Local authority staff, West Yorkshire)

A further legislative change that appears to have been a catalyst to the improvement of the organisational framework of police authorities in relation to public engagement is the 'Best Value' review process. Several authorities in the survey stage of the research independently mentioned that they had, or were in the process of completing such reviews of their consultation arrangements. The case studies revealed Best Value reviews had been extremely influential in South Wales and the MPA, despite difficulties in implementing certain recommendations in some areas. Avon and Somerset had also previously conducted an influential joint review of consultation, albeit outside the framework of Best Value.

North Yorkshire and GMPA had recently been completing Best Value reviews. The review in North Yorkshire, conducted jointly between the force and the authority made some very sensible and positive recommendations, including the need for the authority to use a 'basket' of different consultation methods, tailored to engage different groups within communities. The review in GMPA was of all authority activity (not just consultation) but it did confirm the existing consultation strategy and, in common with North Yorkshire, set specific targets and performance measures for consultation.

Barriers to consultation having an impact

In the case study research, the poor quality of the output of consultation was one reason given by forces for why authorities do not make more impact. There are other barriers to consultation having an impact, which can vary according to the aim of consultation.

Conflicting priorities

One of the most frequently cited barriers to impact on policing priorities was the view that priorities emerging from local consultation often differed from national priorities and targets. Respondents from both forces and authorities expressed the view that there had been an increasing number of national priorities in recent years and it was thought by some that, as a result, local consultation was having, or would have, less impact in the future. This limitation could also lead to consultation raising expectations that could not be fulfilled. In Avon and Somerset, police force respondents felt that the Home Office was concerned with priority crime targets but the public with reassurance and visibility. They were assessed on the former but not the latter, which might mean having to ignore the public's views.

A perception that local views were being over-ridden was particularly widespread in West Yorkshire, in both the force and the authority. Street crime, the Home Office's priority, was not thought to be a problem in the authority, whereas burglary was a public concern. A further problem raised in West Yorkshire was the number of different priorities or plans, and the lack of co-ordination between them. Force-wide priorities could also conflict with more local concerns.

However, there was an acceptance amongst respondents in forces and authorities that priority setting should not reflect the outcomes of public consultation alone. One authority staff member said that this would result in warped, unrepresentative priorities. Other factors needed to be taken into account, for example, issues of which the public was not aware:

“We then need to take on board what the public see as on-going problems in their own area, but the public will tend to see what is happening now, they won't see what is coming or what is really going to hit them.” (Police force, South Wales).

One example, given by an authority member, of where the public's views differed from the 'expert' view was of 'bobbies on the beat'. While popular with the public, the 'expert view' of both police and authority was that they might not be effective. A compromise could be reached whereby patrols could be targeted so as to be most visible.

Making outputs influence decisions

Problems with the process of feeding the outputs of consultation into decision-making were also a barrier. Research has shown that consultation is wasted unless followed by a proper analysis and consideration of the results and an open process of decision-making and change implementation. This is necessary for accountability, monitoring and evaluation, yet there are frequently weaknesses in organisations' consultation at this stage (Sergeant and Steele, 1998). In the case study sites, public feedback was not always available at the right time to feed into the planning and budgetary processes. This was a particular problem in the MPA, which has to fit in with the Mayor and GLA's consultation and planning cycle. Adequate mechanisms for ensuring that consultation was adequately linked into decision-making structures were also needed. In the MPA, a view was expressed that this was not currently the case. In Avon and Somerset, however, it was thought that consultation did feed directly into strategic decision-making: The Best Value and Consultation Committee decided what the targets should be and it was then up to the Finance Committee to resource this.

In terms of impact on day-to-day policing, a few respondents mentioned that the exclusion of operational matters from the police authority's remit was a barrier. Operations are the responsibility of the Chief Constable, although the precise nature of the distinction between operations and policy is open to debate (e.g., Reiner and Spencer, 1993; Lustgarten 1986). It was suggested in one authority that it might be possible to influence the force under the Best Value duty and possibly the authority's new responsibilities for health and safety.

There were also problems with ensuring that the results of consultation with implications for quality of service are taken on board throughout the force. For example, in one authority, the information was said not to get from HQ to divisional commanders. In another, the police authority operated at a high management level and lessons from consultation relevant to quality of service were not always driven down to an operational level. Inspectors and sergeants were not held to account over whether they acted on these. It was suggested that, to overcome this barrier, training was needed and the authority should have a higher profile.

Evaluation

It is recommended that consultation should be reviewed and evaluated in order to assess its effectiveness. Authorities are also required by law to review consultation arrangements 'from time to time' (Elliott and Nicholls, 1996). In the case study authorities, evaluation of individual consultation exercises was piecemeal and evaluation was often informal. The GMPA, North Yorkshire and West Yorkshire gave out evaluation forms to participants at the end of consultation events. The MPA had used an evaluation by the Metropolitan Police Service of the 2002/3 joint consultation exercise on priorities, including the effectiveness of e-consultation. One example of a formal external evaluation was that done by Bradford University of the Independent Advisory Group on behalf of West Yorkshire. In Avon and Somerset, the Community Consultation Planners in each district review the effectiveness of consultation undertaken. Reasons given for authorities not evaluating consultation were

resources and lack of expertise. In terms of authorities' consultation packages as a whole, Best Value reviews were highly influential in leading to change.

Other factors

Other factors affecting the impact of consultation included:

- resources available for policing;
- opposition from trade unions stopped an authority initiative to use volunteers to staff police stations;
- differences of opinion within communities; and
- personal relationships, which can be key to influencing the force.

Summary

Consultation overload and public apathy are perceived as key barriers to successful public engagement by police authorities – although evidence from focus groups with members of the public suggests this may be overstated. Authorities may be able to overcome the barrier of overload by co-ordinating their consultation with that of partner agencies. Another way in which to overcome the barrier of consultation overload would be to widen the pool of potential consultees. It is suggested that authorities may be able to achieve this by providing more adequate feedback to members of the public on the outcome of consultation exercises and by creating a more 'ongoing' dialogue.

Lack of money and resources can act as a barrier to successful engagement, although again there was evidence that strategic approaches to consultation can succeed in maximising available resources. Consultation exercises are more likely to be successful if they are undertaken by properly trained staff. The case study research revealed that skills gaps within authorities can also act as a barrier. Authorities' awareness and use of existing good practice literature in the area of public engagement was found to be patchy.

Local politics and lack of co-operation between partner agencies was found to be a barrier to successful public engagement in some areas, as was the level of co-ordination within the authority itself. Some case study authorities had undertaken reviews of their consultation strategies and arrangements, often within the framework of 'Best Value'. Such reviews had generally made sensible recommendations and authorities that are not so far down this route could learn much from those who have completed reviews.

This research also revealed potential barriers to consultation making an impact, aside from the general factor of some outputs from consultation being of a poor quality. Firstly, authorities feel strongly that there are now numerous national policing priorities that override priorities arising from local consultation. Secondly, there were issues of feedback of outputs, with evidence that, sometimes, the outputs from consultation were not available at the appropriate time to feed into planning processes. Finally, it was apparent that evaluation of individual consultation exercises was piecemeal among authorities and often of a very basic standard.

7. Conclusions and recommendations

A debate is under way on how to strengthen local accountability and citizen participation in policing. Far-reaching reforms may be considered. This research study focuses on how to strengthen citizen engagement in the immediate term. However, many of the lessons will be applicable in any future scenarios that emerge. Police authorities' effectiveness in engaging the public has advanced since previous research was carried out. Nonetheless, progress has been patchy and so many of the recommendations of the present study reinforce those of previous research. While the survey encompassed all authorities, many of the findings are based on the six case study authorities. These were selected on the basis that they had carried out a wide range of consultation activities, including with 'hard-to-hear' groups, and had attempted to develop new approaches. It is reasonable to assume that many other authorities will have greater progress to make.

Transparency, visibility and communication with the public

The public is not generally aware of the existence or role of police authorities. Indeed, respondents in the case study sites, including some from authorities themselves, widely acknowledged this. Some respondents also believed that some police officers and other stakeholders were unsure of the authority's role. There were mixed views as to whether a high public profile was necessary for authorities. Members of the public regarded authorities' low public profile as a sign of ineffectiveness and considered that they should give a high priority to publicising themselves. There is evidence from the USA that mass-marketing may lead to wider recognition of consultation opportunities but is unlikely to directly encourage participation. Personal networking is more effective for this purpose.

Focus groups suggested the public was, in general, poorly informed about policing. The non-English-speaking woman's group in particular did not have even basic information about services. People's highest priority was for information of practical use. They might be more interested in performance information if it was provided at a very local level, if statistics were perceived as accurate and if people felt the information made a difference to their lives. Views on whether people would access information using the Internet were mixed. Most authorities had a website or web page and almost all planned to have one within a year.

Police authorities' approaches to consultation

Past research has recommended that police authorities and forces should compile and prioritise their own aims for consultation, in line with local circumstances (Elliott and Nicholls, 1996:66). The present study suggests that authorities recognise the need for a consultation strategy with clearly defined aims, but that this has not occurred across the board. There was evidence of aims being locally focused; for example, authorities that specified improving community relations as an aim had experienced recent community tensions. Some authorities also recognised the need to have clear aims and objectives when undertaking specific consultation exercises. Often, the authorities that had made the most progress in adopting a strategic approach were those that had undertaken Best Value reviews encompassing consultation.

Joint consultation with the force has many advantages, including sharing of resources, with the only principal disadvantage being a blurring of identity between the two organisations. In Avon and Somerset, the authority had empowered the force with responsibility for undertaking consultation (whilst retaining the power to request or undertake specific exercises) allowing it to play a more strategic role. This appears to work well, though it might be considered particularly important that authorities retain the capacity to undertake their own consultation when appropriate. The issue of joint working with the force has been overtaken to some extent by multi-agency working, which was widely considered to be beneficial, or potentially beneficial. There were several examples of effective multi-agency working although this was inconsistent within and between authorities. Police authorities' new status on CDRPs and the

streamlining of three-year crime and disorder and policing strategies should promote a more consistent relationship, so that agencies work to a similar timetable. Joint or co-ordinated consultation strategies could facilitate this further. Advance timetables for consultation also help voluntary organisations to mobilise their members.

The role of police authority members is vital to the success of authorities' consultation. Firstly, they set the budgets, so a lack of understanding of the benefits of consultation can result in it being afforded a low priority. Secondly, members often have a large say not only in consultation strategies but also in specific consultation undertaken in particular areas. There were examples of very committed members driving through changes and reforms and adding value to specific consultation events. However, others had less involvement in public engagement. Some are perceived as less open to change or innovation and act as a barrier to successful engagement. In the case study sites, we found different consultation arrangements in different districts. Sometimes, this was a result of tailoring methods to an area but in others it was a result of a lack of involvement or initiative by members linked to that district. Sometimes members' responsibility for a specific area appeared to work well, particularly if they lived locally and had a genuine stake in the area. These members were more likely to be able to act as genuine 'community leaders'. However, in other areas, this was not the case.

Methods of consultation and their effectiveness

Elliott and Nicholls (1996) found that police authorities tended to rely on traditional PCCG-style public meetings as their principal consultation tool. They recommended that authorities develop a range of consultation methods, to suit different purposes and groups of the population. The present study has found that some authorities have made real progress towards this since then but that progress generally has been variable. The majority of authorities appeared to recognise the shortcomings of PCCG-style meetings. Authorities had taken several approaches in response to this. Case study authorities had re-structured, reduced or abandoned PCCGs, with varying degrees of success. There had also been a marked increase in authorities' use of outreach and market research methods and many had begun to experiment with innovative and electronic means of engaging the public. Focus groups, in particular, were more widely utilised than in 1996 and were seen as one of the most effective forms of consultation. However, only just over half of authorities used them.

The need to tailor consultation methods to specific groups applies particularly to 'hard-to-hear' groups, who are least likely to respond to traditional methods of engagement. There was evidence of successful engagement with hard-to-hear groups in some case study areas, though the survey indicated very mixed success within and between authorities. Some authorities had successfully engaged certain hard-to-hear groups but not others. There was only limited evidence of a structured approach to this kind of engagement.

There was limited awareness and use of good practice literature on consultation, such as that produced by the Home Office. The national practitioner network currently being set up by the Home Office and the APA will examine more proactive ways to disseminate good practice.

Making an impact

The quality, reach and impact made by consultation on police services was not generally clearly tracked or communicated. This made it more difficult to assess its benefits. However, there was evidence of consultation influencing policing plans, either by identifying issues or prioritising them. Impact on plans was limited by constraints such as resources and the need to balance local views with national and other priorities. There were also examples of other positive impacts, for example, on crime reduction, and, in particular, police-community relations and community cohesion. Other factors influencing impact were organisational factors such as the need for timely feedback and adequate structures to link consultation into the planning and budgetary processes. The degree to which the evidence from consultation was meaningful and credible increased the likelihood of it being influential.

Overcoming barriers to successful engagement

Many authorities considered public apathy and consultation overload as barriers to successful public engagement. The research with the public suggests that people would like more of a say in how they are policed, but they doubt whether their views will make any real difference. The lack of widespread public participation means that the few who are involved tend to be repeatedly consulted by agencies, resulting in overload or fatigue. Voluntary organisations, in particular, may be persistently consulted by different agencies.

Feedback on the outcome of consultation can encourage participation. Although there were examples of case study authorities feeding back to participants and to the public, this did not usually occur in a structured or routine way. The authorities identified feedback as an area for improvement.

There was evidence that successful engagement is linked to the resources invested, to some degree. However, there was also evidence that authorities can successfully engage even with limited spending, if money is used in an effective way. Partnership working, or taking a more strategic role overseeing police force consultation (as in Avon and Somerset) can maximise limited resources. Agencies can share resources such as electronic voting technology. Human resource factors appeared to be as strong a barrier as lack of money and the evidence suggests that police authorities will get better value from consultation if staff are well trained. A well trained staff could lessen the need to buy in expert assistance from research companies.

Recommendations

- Police authorities should review locally their public profile and give greater emphasis to marketing their role in promoting opportunities for public participation. Highly expensive advertising campaigns, though, would not necessarily be good value for money. Authorities should consider a personal approach towards trying to engage people in consultation, for example, through outreach work and tapping into existing community networks.
- Police authorities, forces and other agencies should improve the provision of information to the public about policing and crime, according to the needs of local communities. This should include basic information about services.
- Police authorities should continue to develop their use of the Internet to engage people, by, for example, using them to feed back on the outcome of consultation events and by the use of attractive links from non-policing websites. However, authorities should not over-rely on the Internet due to limited public access and ensure its use is appropriate to the aims of the consultation and target audience.
- Police authorities should regularly review their strategies for consultation and ensure that aims and objectives are clearly defined and built on a thorough understanding of the nature and composition of local communities.
- Police authorities should consider whether the scope of their consultation fully reflects issues of concern to local communities. They should be prepared to adapt their consultation schedules to incorporate issues of local concern as and when they arise.
- Police authorities should adopt some simple targets with which to assess their performance in terms of reach, quality and impact of consultation.
- Police authorities should co-ordinate their consultation strategies and activities with the force and other partners. Authorities should combine consultation with other agencies wherever this would add value. They should also be aware that it is possible to add value to the process by empowering other agencies to consult and adopting a more strategic or scrutinising role.

- Police authorities should ensure that training is provided for all members to familiarise them with the benefits of community engagement, good practice, and, where appropriate, practical skills such as facilitating meetings. Authorities should also consider setting a minimum level of activity required of members in terms of community engagement.
- Police authorities still relying on PCCG-style public meetings as their principal form of consultation should diversify their methods. Public meetings should be used only if they satisfy a particular aim or it can be demonstrated that they are preferred by the public in a particular area or community. Regular, non-specific, public meetings should not be retained merely because they satisfy a statutory requirement to consult. Unproductive PCCG-style meetings should be reduced or abandoned in favour of alternative methods.
- Public meetings tend to work better if they are well chaired and police authorities should ensure that members have appropriate skills in this area. Chairs should make clear the purpose of the meeting and emphasise the role of the police authority in the consultation process. They should also be able to keep the meeting focused on its aims and prevent it being 'hijacked' by individuals or specific interests. Authorities should also be aware of a wider range of facilitation methods that can be used to maximise the value of public meetings (given a suitable target audience).
- Police authorities should build targeting of hard-to-hear groups into their consultation plans and strategies. Authorities should identify both which are the most relevant groups they need to engage in their local community and which methods are suitable to achieve this.
- Police authorities should not expect the public to come to them to be consulted; they should go out and engage people on their own terms and in locations and situations in which they feel comfortable. They should also make use of existing organisations and meetings if this is appropriate or would add value.
- Police authorities should ensure that their members and staff are aware of existing good practice literature on consultation and community engagement. Authorities should also be pro-active in sharing good practice with other partner agencies including the force.
- Agencies producing guidance should consider alternative formats to traditional reports, such as interactive CD-ROMs or e-mail networks. More active sharing of good practice should be encouraged.
- Each police authority should have at least one post solely or partly dedicated to promoting and co-ordinating consultation and community engagement. The post-holder should attempt to map all consultation undertaken by partner agencies to prevent duplication, ensure opportunities to extend their reach are fully exploited and that feedback from consultation reaches the appropriate people.
- Police authorities should review the skills base of staff with a remit for consultation and public engagement. They should ensure that these staff have the necessary skills to deliver their consultation strategy, for example in the areas of social research methodology, diversity awareness, marketing and communications and community development.
- Police authorities should build systematic feedback into consultation. This should include not only feedback to the people who participated, but also to the general public. If the public perceives that consultation is worthwhile, the pool of potential consultees will increase. In particular, authorities should attempt to get positive messages across, about what has changed as a result of consultation.
- Police authorities should make clear if consultation is designed to inform strategic plans and will not have short-term impact. They should seek to manage expectations and to avoid the public becoming disillusioned if action is not taken on their views.

- Police authorities should make sure that there are effective mechanisms for feedback of consultation to the force and other agencies.
- Forces should ensure that there are effective mechanisms to respond to consultation and to cascade information down to front-line officers.
- Police authorities should build evaluation of the quality, reach and impact of their consultation exercises, or at least of those which are most key, into their plans. This should also include some assessment of cost-effectiveness. Evaluation will entail cost (unless the authority has professional skills in-house) but should repay the investment.
- Police authorities should ensure that the impact of consultation and their own contribution to it is clearly identified and communicated to their own staff and members, police forces and partner agencies. For example, policing plans and annual reports should show the results of consultation and how they fed into decision-making.
- Police authorities should monitor and follow-up what action forces are taking as a result of issues raised by consultation.

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