

Restoring public confidence through the delivery of improved community policing in
Rackhamshire

Safer Communities (Accepted 11 January 2022)

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Abstract

Purpose: Neighbourhood policing is a central approach to supporting public confidence in England and Wales. However, the delivery of neighbourhood policing models is increasingly fragmented, and under pressure from austerity measures and from changes to demand and priorities. This research set out to understand the current state of neighbourhood policing in the county of 'Rackhamshire' and its ability to support public confidence.

Methodology: We conducted six focus groups, three with officers who were part of Community Policing Teams (CPTs), and three with members of the community who were actively engaged with community policing and local concerns. These were supplemented by two interviews with senior officers (35 participants in total).

Findings: Austerity-driven changes to policing in Rackhamshire have damaged the capacities of CPTs, and residents have begun to lose confidence in the ability of the police to respond to their fears. We argue that reforms intended to make policing more efficient and effective appear to have the opposite effect on community policing, by preventing it from working in a way that can support public confidence, and that this could have longer-term consequences.

Originality: The effects of austerity on the mechanisms by which neighbourhood policing supports confidence have been relatively neglected. By exploring the state of these mechanisms in one English constabulary, this research has exposed serious weaknesses in the way that community policing is able to support public confidence, and suggest practical operational responses. In light of these findings, this article argues for the urgent reinstatement of earlier models of neighbourhood policing.

Key words: public confidence; community policing; neighbourhood policing; visibility; community engagement

Introduction

Public confidence remains a key metric of police success in England and Wales. In the mid-2000s, a perceived gulf between levels of crime and public confidence led to the development of the Neighbourhood Policing model. In the original programme, which lasted from 2005-2008, this was predicated on three pillars: visibility, community engagement, and problem-solving. However, since 2010, and austerity-led cuts to police budgets, neighbourhood policing has become fragmented (Higgins, 2018).

The English constabulary of ‘Rackhamshire’ (pseudonym) is no exception to this. The Rackhamshire Police, Fire and Crime Commissioner’s (PFCC) Police and Crime Plan for 2016 – 2020 states that providing communities with more local, visible and accessible policing is a key priority, with the aim of increasing community confidence (Rackhamshire OPFCC, 2016). In 2018, the Office of the PFCC commissioned research to identify strategies to improve public confidence through community policing.

This paper draws on the findings of a series of focus groups and interviews held with police officers and members of the public actively engaged with community policing across the county of Rackhamshire to respond to this. The findings of this research suggest that community or neighbourhood policing in its current form in Rackhamshire is not supporting public confidence in the way one might expect given the support expressed for this model in the Police and Crime Plan. This suggests that either the details of how community policing works to support confidence is not clearly understood; or that other priorities have come to dominate.

The success of community policing is recognised as resting at least in part on organisational recognition and commitment (Lloyd and Foster, 2009; Foster and Jones, 2010; Colover and

Quinton, 2018). This study suggests that it also requires an organisational commitment to the goal of community policing as supporting public confidence, as well as the processes of visibility, community engagement and problem-solving through which it does so. Without that recognition, the existence of a community policing team may be regarded as enough to support public confidence, even as the absence of sufficient resources and support - due to competing demands on the organisation - can actively prevent those teams from achieving their goals.

Literature

Confidence

Public confidence in policing remains a key performance indicator in England and Wales. Indeed, for a brief period under the last Labour government, all national performance targets were abolished except that of public confidence (Bradford, Jackson and Hough, 2013). While subsequent governments shifted focus to crime-fighting as the key purpose of the police (Reiner, 2012), many police forces and OPCCs continued to regularly measure and track confidence, and set themselves internal confidence targets to meet; while HMICFRS also commissions surveys of public perceptions and confidence in the police (BMG Research, 2019). More recent government rhetoric suggests public confidence may return to a more central position (Home Office, 2021); however, this has yet to be reflected in funding or policy implementation.

There is a substantial literature on the nature of public confidence in policing and what supports it; most of which is survey-based (Harkin, 2015). There is less qualitative research exploring the way that neighbourhood policing is understood on the ground. Confidence is known to be fragile; Bradford, Jackson and Stanko (2009) found that all contacts between the

police and the public risked damaging confidence, particularly in police effectiveness. However, some activities, such as high-quality community engagement, can support confidence (ibid); a topic explored further in the next section. The way that people assess their local police rests less on individual concerns about the risk of victimisation and more on judgements of community cohesion, police presence and neighbourhood stability (Jackson and Bradford, 2009; Merry *et al.*, 2012) – confidence is expressive, rather than instrumental. This helps explain the widening gap between (falling) crime levels and public confidence in the police that concerned the Labour government in the late 1990s and into the 2000s, and in part led to the launch of neighbourhood policing as a dedicated programme to address this.

Community Policing

The Neighbourhood Policing Programme (NPP), which ran from 2005 to 2008, established dedicated neighbourhood policing teams across every force area. Each would deliver three key mechanisms aimed at supporting confidence: “police visibility; community involvement in identifying local priorities; and collaborative problem-solving with partners and the public to tackle those priorities.” (Quinton and Morris, 2008, p. iv). Activities included targeted foot patrol, formalised community engagement such as public meetings; and locally driven crime prevention measures.

Neighbourhood Policing’s roots lay in the National Reassurance Policing Programme (NRPP) which ran between 2003 and 2005. The NRPP was developed in concert with academics from the University of Surrey and was based on the ‘signal crimes’ perspective (Innes and Fielding, 2002). This suggested that the police should focus on incidents that had a disproportionate effect on the public’s perception of risk (Innes and Fielding 2002; College of Policing 2017). Addressing such issues would allow the police to demonstrate their ability to

exercise social control, and symbolise security for local residents (Barker, 2014). The focus of the NRPP was thus on reassurance, rather than directly addressing crime itself.

The evaluation of the NRPP found positive changes in all key outcome measures: improved public confidence, less crime, reduced perceptions of crime and disorder, and increased feelings of safety. The visibility of police was a crucial element in reassurance, though the evaluation also suggested that visibility alone was unlikely to deliver positive shifts in public perception, and that problem-solving and community engagement were essential elements (Tuffin, Morris and Poole, 2006). All three elements were therefore incorporated into the NPP on its national launch.

Visibility is often regarded as synonymous with foot patrol (Sindall and Sturgis, 2013). Foot patrol, or the ‘bobby on the beat’, has symbolic importance (Wakefield, 2006; The Police Foundation, 2020), and can improve public confidence (Scribbins *et al.*, 2010). However, the iconography of the ‘bobby on the beat’ can elide the complexity of the ways in which foot patrol works (Innes, 2004). The evaluation of the NRPP, the predecessor to the Neighbourhood Policing Programme, suggested that its effectiveness depended on its integration with problem-solving activities and effective community engagement (Dalglish and Myhill, 2004; Quinton and Morris, 2008); while its efficacy in reducing crime and disorder may depend on its targeting of high crime locations (Sherman and Eck, 2002).

The second ‘mechanism’, community engagement, can range from ordinary interactions with the public, through strategic monitoring, accountability, partnerships, and the empowerment of local residents to solve problems themselves (Myhill, 2012). Official guidance has consistently suggested that forces move beyond formal engagement to use more creative methods of talking to the public to ensure that priorities identified by the public are

representative (Myhill, 2012). In practice, however, what most police forces do is hold public meetings (Foster and Jones, 2010). Such approaches can have a positive impact on confidence by rendering local officers more accessible, helping communicate how officers are dealing with problems, and improving police-community relations (Forrest, Myhill and Tilley, 2005; Hunter, Fyfe and Brown, 2011). However, there remain concerns that public meetings can be unrepresentative, and are therefore a poor method of reflecting the concerns of the entire neighbourhood (Bull and Stratta, 1994; Myhill *et al*, 2003; Foster and Jones, 2010).

This has ramifications for the third and final pillar, that of problem-solving. Neighbourhood policing departs from earlier Problem-Oriented Policing (POP) approaches (Goldstein, 1979) in its insistence that the community be involved in solving problems at every stage (Bullock and Tilley, 2009). If the methods through which police identify and resolve problems exclude sectors of the community, this has ramifications for the legitimacy of those processes.

All of these 'mechanisms' are resource intensive and require broad support from the wider police organisation. Most evaluations of community policing underline that organisational elements are crucial (Quinton and Morris, 2008). Problem-solving for example is most effective when supported by sound analytical capacity (Bullock and Tilley, 2009; Colover and Quinton, 2018), and recruitment and retention into neighbourhood policing roles undertaken with care (Bullock and Tilley 2009; Colover and Quinton, 2018). Moreover, the importance of setting clear organisational expectations for neighbourhood policing is evident; community policing is not always explicitly about reducing crime and its success is difficult to measure by such metrics.

Although the three-year Neighbourhood Policing Programme came to an end in 2008, ‘neighbourhood policing’ continued across all forces. However, with little central guidance until recently (new College of Policing guidelines were published in 2018), it has become increasingly fractured in terms of delivery, resourcing and core functions. Budget cuts have led to the reduction of police numbers and several forces have reduced their neighbourhood policing teams or reformed them either in geographical scope or in what they are intended to do (Higgins, 2018). In 2005, the College of Policing ran a ‘practice stocktake’ of neighbourhood policing (College of Policing, 2015), which found that, though the principles of neighbourhood policing were highly valued, many forces had insufficient dedicated neighbourhood officers and were struggling to deliver it.

Rackhamshire was not immune to these changes. In 2015, Rackhamshire announced it was reorganising its neighbourhood policing teams to create 10 Community Policing Teams, covering an area equivalent to a local authority district. The stated aim of this reform was to increase flexibility, cut overheads and increase efficiency (ITV, 2015). The focus on geographically bounded neighbourhoods, usually coterminous with Local Authority wards, was replaced with the more flexible idea of ‘community’ (Rackhamshire Police, 2020). In practice, the structural changes saw a significant alteration to local community relationships and the introduction of a much wider remit for the reduced Community Policing Teams⁴.

Public confidence in Rackhamshire remained a concern and was regularly tracked. In in 2017/18, Social and Market Strategic Research (SMSR) examined public opinion of Rackhamshire Police through 7,708 interviews with residents. Overall, public perceptions were largely positive, with 81% of respondents thinking Rackhamshire was doing a good or

⁴ The new CPTs varied in strength according to the population of the area covered, but had significantly reduced numbers of both PCs and PCSOs compared to the allocations under the Neighbourhood Policing Programme. In 2008 Rackhamshire had well over 400 PCSOs; by 2020 there were just over 100.

excellent job; and 67% of respondents said they had confidence in the police. While these results were largely positive, there was evidence to suggest Ruckhamshire could improve. Only 4 in 10 respondents reported satisfaction with the level of policing in their area, despite 65% of respondents feeling that a regular uniformed police presence in their area was very important. Some 25% of respondents felt there had been a decrease in the level of policing in the last 12 months, whilst 36% felt that crime and anti-social behaviour had increased in the last 12 months (SMSR Research, 2018).

In 2018, partly prompted by these findings, the Office of the PFCC in Ruckhamshire commissioned a study into whether public confidence in community policing in Ruckhamshire was still supported by its community policing activities, and if so, how. The aim of this study was to explore the current state of community policing in Ruckhamshire, and its relationship to public confidence in the police, as viewed by community policing teams (CPTs) and residents; and to identify strategies to improve public confidence through community policing.

Method

Participants

Focus groups were conducted with police officers and residents involved with community policing in Ruckhamshire. While this limited our data collection to those already engaged with the police (in the case of residents) and with community policing (in the case of officers), we judged that such participants would be well placed to discuss how community policing activities should work, to judge when they were successful, and to assess what might have prevented them from achieving their aims.

We therefore focused on three Community Policing Teams (CPTs) covering three Local Authority districts in Rackhamshire. A total of six focus groups were conducted (three with police participants, three with community members), as well as interviews with Inspectors and Chief Inspectors for two of the areas, with 35 total participants (15 male and 20 female, see Table 1). Based in part on the results of the SMSR research on public views and experience of policing in Rackhamshire for 2017/18, these areas were selected to ensure a range of levels of public confidence in local policing. Areas selected had a mix of both rural and urban geographies, as this was the most common profile of districts in Rackhamshire.

Rackhamshire is a large county in the south-east of England. The population of Rackhamshire has a slightly higher proportion of persons aged over 65+ than the national average. Black and ethnic minority people make up around 9% of the population. Over 70% of Rackhamshire is rural and while the majority of residents of Rackhamshire live in or close to urban centres, a third live in rural areas ('Rackhamshire' County Council, 2019). This makes accessing services difficult for many residents, and maintaining a visible presence a challenge for police.

*****Table I about here*****

The focus groups included Police Constables, Police Community Support Officers, and sergeants; senior officers were interviewed separately to avoid any 'chilling' effect of rank which could limit the extent to which more junior officers felt free to be candid (Bull and Stratta, 1994). Recruitment for the police focus groups was facilitated by Rackhamshire Police public engagement officers who provided contact details and meeting rooms.

Recruitment for the community focus groups was facilitated by police officers passing on contact details of 'key' community members, and by researchers attending local community

meetings, after which attendees were invited to participate by a member of the research team via email. Given the limited scope of the project, this was not intended to provide a representative sample of residents in Rackhamshire, but to gain an in-depth insight into the workings of local policing as seen by those who had had recent encounters with it.

This approach to sampling led to varied groups. In District 1 several local council officers and security guards from a local shopping centre were included, as having direct engagement with of local police teams; while in District 3 the focus group was made up largely of local residents who regularly took part in police-public meetings and other forms of local community engagement. This allowed for some perspective on the public's experience of community policing in Rackhamshire, despite the limited sample.

Analysis

Qualitative data obtained by the focus groups and interviews were recorded and transcribed. The outcome of the focus groups and interviews were subjected to thematic analysis (Braun and Clarke, 2006). This was an iterative and discursive process shared between the first and second authors. From these codes, a series of themes and sub-themes was developed.

Ethics

Ethical approval for this research was granted by the Faculty Research Ethics Panel (FREP) under the terms of Anglia Ruskin University's Research Ethics Policy.

Results

Officers who participated in the study offered four ways in which the work of neighbourhood policing was distinctive: it involved proactive problem-solving, compared to models such as

response policing; it dealt with long-term problems; it confronted issues that might not traditionally be seen as police concerns; and it included partnership working as integral to its purpose and function.

The three ‘mechanisms’ identified at the launch of Neighbourhood Policing as contributing to public confidence were visibility, community engagement, and problem-solving. While, participants in Rackhamshire saw all of these as having a role in contributing to confidence, they expressed concern that their delivery was being eroded. In particular, members of the public found the police much less accessible than previously, and expressed a general fear of crime that they related directly to the withdrawal of police services.

Visibility and familiarity

Despite the pressures of reduced resources, officers felt foot patrol remained integral to community policing and its contribution to confidence:

“You walk around for two hours or an hour on a market day, where you’re likely to see 300 people ... Well, actually, you’ve ticked a lot of boxes, you’ve shook a lot of hands, you’ve engaged, you’ve shared knowledge, you’ve picked up intelligence that you’re feeding back into this machine of local community policing.” (Inspector, D1)

While some residents equated the absence of police on the streets as a signal that they lived in a safe area, others indicated that a visible police presence made them feel more secure:

“It’s just that deterrent, as well, for people to know that they’re around, so just to deter crime. Also, to reassure people ... people want to feel safe in their homes, and that if something bad happens the police can stop it.” (Resident, D1)

However, in practice, officers reported that other demands and lack of numbers meant they could not undertake foot patrol as often as they would like. This was exacerbated by rural geography. Quieter areas might see no police presence for weeks at a time. Officers reported that increased travel times made life difficult on a practical level, as well as diminishing their sense of guardianship over certain areas. Fewer foot patrols also meant less information from the community about local priorities.

“The amount of intelligence that we used to get just from foot patrol and talking to the general public, residents, that would come up and give you a little bit of information, that doesn’t happen so much... it’s just impossible to cover such a wide area.” (PCSO, D2)

Some teams had found ways to try to increase their visibility: in one district, officers were assigned to local beats, and in some areas, Special Constables were given responsibility for patrolling certain villages. Residents made little distinction between Special Constables, PCSOs and full-time warranted officers. The use of Specials was welcomed, and in one village, they were also working with residents to enhance their presence on social media. Residents particularly valued their local PCSOs, were conscious of reduced numbers, and missed their presence in their communities: “They worked in a set area, they knew everybody, and they knew what was going on.” (Resident, D1).

The community policing teams in the three districts felt it was essential to retain good local knowledge of their communities. However, local knowledge was seen as vulnerable to high turnover and the loss of local officers:

“You can’t train that sort of knowledge, it’s just from them being in the area... it’s difficult to gain and very easy to lose” (PCSO, D3)

Participants suggested that the familiarity and local knowledge of these officers meant they had access to information and the capacity to build relationships that were not available to other officers:

“She was engaging, she was proactive, and because she knew the area and the people so well, she would be spoken to in a different way, really, than an outside officer would be.”

(Resident, D1)

The allocation of a police officer to a given ‘beat,’ which had in many places been lost in the reorganisation of neighbourhood policing into the larger CPTs, was not just valued because of the local knowledge that officers could build up, but also because residents saw those officers as caring more about the neighbourhood. Thus the reorganisation of resources was interpreted by residents as having reduced not just police numbers, but also the extent to which remaining officers had a commitment to the areas where residents lived.

Community engagement

Community engagement could range from formal encounters, such as local community meetings, to talking to residents when on foot patrol. The key engagement activities discussed in the focus groups were community meetings; engagement with local groups; ‘Coffee with Cops;’⁵ and social media.

Local community meetings were held regularly, though experiences were mixed. There was agreement that meetings were important, despite being time-consuming and sometimes having low turnout. Some officers felt that more training could be provided about the best

⁵ ‘Coffee with cops’ involved officers spending time in a public space (usually in a café), with residents encouraged to stop by and talk to police.

way to conduct these meetings to maximise their effectiveness, and particularly the way to manage public expectations. Resident participants who attended the community meetings, however, valued them very highly as an opportunity to voice their concerns.

Police were also actively engaged with local community groups, some of which had been formed to tackle problems related to community safety. Residents spoke very positively of these activities, describing the community coming together, feeling more secure, and praising the responsiveness of the police. Both of these activities involved leadership from the community itself; as one resident put it, “We (the community) steer this group” (Resident, D3).

Opinions on the efficacy of ‘Coffee with Cops’ were more mixed. Officers in D2 were largely positive and felt it was a well-attended and successful way to engage with the community. In contrast, D1 officers felt the community could be better served by other activities such as foot patrol or problem solving. Coffee with Cops met with mixed reviews from residents as well. It may be that there is a lack of clarity on the primary purpose of this particular method of community engagement; police visibility and encouraging information-sharing may not always be compatible aims.

Social media was also identified by the police focus groups as a useful but challenging tool for community policing. When asked if social media could be considered as a form of visibility, the police participants generally agreed: “they won’t see you walking past their house, but they see a picture of you walking past on their phone, and that’s how people are visible. So, it is important” (Sergeant, D2).

Residents also spoke of the centrality of social media to their own sense of security and to their knowledge of community safety issues. One said that their main way of finding out

about crimes was through Facebook. However, social media was seen as a double-edged sword. The challenge of using social media and achieving the right ‘tone’ has been similarly found in other studies (Copitch and Fox, 2010). On the one hand, the sharing of information was easy. On the other hand, residents were aware that spreading such messages had potential downsides in terms of blowing issues out of proportion and raising fears of crime:

“Having social media over the last few years... has raised awareness... that makes it seem like [the area is] less safe. But it’s not necessarily, it’s just that you’re getting the message across.” (Resident, D1).

Priorities and problem-solving

Officers were clear that the issues raised through community engagement then needed to be addressed. However, local priorities were often seen as being at odds with broader force priorities⁶ - despite one of these being more local, visible policing - or with national priorities.

“One of the problems we have is, when we go through the tasking process, that unless it meets some of the strategic outcomes of the force, we don’t get support for it. And, we will get trumped ... it will be a local problem for us that people are screaming about, but it doesn’t meet the strategic objectives” (CI, D1)

Issues brought to local officers were also often linked to broader social problems, such as drugs, homelessness, and mental health. Here, Community Policing Teams were often responsible for coordinating with other agencies, but the issues themselves were not

⁶ Force priorities outlined in the 2006 Police and Crime Plan included domestic abuse, serious violence, organised crime, protecting children and vulnerable people, and road safety, as well as ASB and visible, accessible policing.

necessarily regarded as police problems. Multi-agency working through strong partnerships was an important element of community policing in Ruckhamshire. It was essential to have long term relationships with other agencies, despite this taking time and effort.

“That’s what I’d love to see community policing being again... deal with, sort-of, what the people want us to do... Yes, it’s a minor drug dealer or drug user or whatever it might be and in the bigger picture that’s a minor issue but, actually, to that person it’s a massive issue and we get a lot of public confidence from actually dealing with it”
(Sergeant, D2).

Residents were open to the idea of other agencies undertaking some of the work that the police were not able to take on. For example, some residents were keen to see more youth workers visible in the community and low-level issues such as graffiti were recognised as falling under the remit of the council rather than the police.

The perceived absence of the police meant that residents felt compelled at times to fill the gap, but without always understanding how the gap could be filled; or whether it was ethical to expect them to do so. However, one clear area of consensus was that the capacity of police officers to undertake long-term problem-solving had been significantly reduced.

Problems in delivery

There was agreement among police and resident respondents that community policing had become challenging and that the community policing teams were not recognised as a priority within the organisation. There were three areas in which the direct and indirect effects of budget cuts were particularly felt: the abstraction of officers from their neighbourhood roles;

the relative unresponsiveness of Rackhamshire police to residents' calls for service; and the related sense, particularly among residents, that their daily lives were less safe.

Abstraction

Abstraction is a term used by police forces for the practice of removing officers from their designated duties to fill gaps in provision elsewhere (HMIC, 2017). In all three districts, officers reported being regularly drawn away from their community policing activities by 'more serious' calls for service. Some reported that core neighbourhood policing tasks had been passed almost in their entirety to PCSOs. However, the numbers of PCSOs had been significantly reduced in Rackhamshire - falling from 250 in 2014 across the county (ITV, 2015) to just 108 by 2019 (Home Office, 2019). Those remaining were responsible for far larger areas and as a result had less local knowledge. Neighbourhood policing functions were thus not only stretched, both geographically and across fewer personnel, but also rested on weaker foundations in the community.

Unresponsiveness

A perception that the police would no longer respond to calls was commonplace. Residents keenly felt the loss of their police stations, which affected both police visibility and accessibility, and several said that they felt at a loss as to where to go to report low-level problems. They also spoke of not being able to get a police response even to incidents which they had deemed serious enough to call 999.

"I've actually been put on hold, when I called 999, and I even worked in Rackhamshire Police before, I didn't even know that was a thing, I didn't even know you could go on hold. I was really shocked." (Resident, D1)

No member of the public had anything positive to say about the 101 non-emergency number. Waiting times were reported as between 45 minutes and two hours. Many residents were no longer willing to use the number at all. However, residents also expressed a belief that 999 was for emergencies only. This meant that respondents felt that they no longer knew how to report non-emergency issues, especially given the closure of local police stations.

This had obvious consequences for the flow of information from members of the public to the police, as well as for public confidence in police accessibility and responsiveness. Officers were aware of the public's reluctance to call the police and their awareness of the pressure on officers, and were concerned as to the effect of this on the ability of CPTs to solve problems.

“That’s what we hear time and time again, when we go to the shops and businesses, ‘I didn’t bother calling because I know you guys are busy with other stuff’. And I think the public perception of policing is damaged – they either think that we don’t care or we’re too busy. It’s a bit of a slippery slope, because then we find if people aren’t reporting stuff to us, we then don’t know what’s going on” (PC, D1)

Those local police officers who were known by name were unanimously highly regarded, suggesting that the public's sense of safety and security was damaged by the absence of familiar and accessible officers, and clear and efficient methods of contact, as much as the ability of the police to respond. The emotional response from residents suggested that, while fear was growing and confidence ebbing, this was a reluctant process; in fact, many residents expressed sympathy and understanding for the position in which the police found themselves.

“There is a massive reality gap between what they want to achieve and do for us, and that they’re able to achieve” (Resident, D1)

Fear of crime

Many residents spoke of a deteriorating sense of personal and collective safety in their community, and a growing fear of crime and disorder. Participants focused on particular issues that they cited as causing such anxiety. Issues around drug taking and dealing were mentioned by residents in all the communities studied, as well as robberies, violence and shoplifting.

“The perception is that it’s quite bad, and people are quite nervous and frightened, I suppose, and I don’t know how to address that at the moment” (Resident, D1)

These four areas cited by residents suggest that budget cuts, reduced resources, and the reorganisation of local policing in Rackhamshire into larger CPTs with wider responsibilities, have all contributed to a situation where residents are more fearful, and police less visible, accessible and responsive to community concerns.

Discussion

The findings highlighted the centrality of community policing to public confidence in the eyes of residents and of those police engaged in it. However, current pressures on these teams, notably from abstraction and a lack of prioritisation of community policing activities within the wider organisation, were inhibiting their ability to fulfil these expectations. This study highlights the danger of assuming that wider organisational needs can take priority over confidence without causing longer-term damage.

One of the core findings of Higgins’ (2018) study into the state of neighbourhood policing was its fragmentation. The report found what Higgins calls a “‘perfect storm’ of increasing

workload and shrinking resource.” (Higgins, 2018a, p.27). This ‘storm’ was reflected in Rackhamshire, though CPTs were valiantly battling the elements. It was clear that both officers and residents retained a strong belief in the original purposes and practices of neighbourhood policing, and the way these processes supported public confidence, regardless of changes to organisation and demand.

Visibility and accessibility

Maintaining a visible presence in the community (particularly through foot patrol) is highly valued by the public (Wakefield, 2006), and was one of the three central elements of the original Neighbourhood Policing Programme believed to support public confidence (Tuffin, Morris and Poole, 2006). This was reflected in Rackhamshire. Residents linked seeing police officers out on patrol both with crime deterrence as well as community confidence and reassurance (Sindall and Sturgis, 2013). However, officers felt they were unable to be as visible to the community as they would like and that they were losing essential local knowledge. Some respondents feared that local knowledge was ‘dying out’ and was difficult to rebuild.

The broad geographical size of the community policing teams appeared to limit the extent to which any officers could gain local knowledge or become truly familiar in their communities; the flexibility that such teams offered could therefore actively conspire against the capacity of CPTs to achieve their goals. Some teams had developed workarounds, such as assigning beats to officers or Special Constables; however, these were not systematically implemented across the force. The closure of stations had accentuated this absence of visible policing, and feelings of loss and vulnerability among residents.

Community engagement

The study underlined the importance to residents of feeling heard by police, and the perceived contribution of this to public confidence. Residents who took part in community meetings valued them very highly and sometimes had a more positive view of the achievements of their local officers as a result of these meetings than the teams themselves. This may be because officers were estimating their teams' success in terms of problems solved, whereas residents appeared to place greater value on being listened to. 'Voice' is a fundamental contributor to assessments of procedural justice (Lind et al, 1990) and by extension to whether people feel that police are treating them fairly. This in turn contributes to confidence and legitimacy; and evidence suggests that this sense of fair treatment is more important than effectiveness in assessments of police legitimacy (Bradford and Jackson, 2010). These findings therefore underline the centrality of community engagement to public confidence in policing.

Social media was not a replacement for this face-to-face engagement. While participants agreed that social media could be considered as a form of visibility, getting the 'right message' was troublesome. The difficulty in cultivating the right tone and message in a way that is 'convincing and feels authentic' has been noted elsewhere (Copitch and Fox, 2010, p. 48). However, a recent study on public perceptions of UK police use of Facebook showed high support for police using social media to share 'live' updates on current local incidents – suggesting this may be a useful solution to increase online visibility (Cartwright and Shaw, 2020).

Challenges in delivering community policing

During the first iteration of neighbourhood policing, Rackhamshire police was praised by HMIC (2008) for its clear policy and limiting of abstractions to a 5% target (HMIC, 2008). However, by the time of this research, abstraction had become one of the most immediate problems cited by officers. In particular, the allocation of ‘hate crime⁷’ to Community Policing Teams had crippled the capacity of some teams to deliver any of the goals of community policing, as officers found almost all of their time dedicated to hate crime instead.

While it was clear from this study that community policing teams had the potential to improve public confidence, their capacity to do so and to address community fears was limited. Some scholars have suggested that ‘fear of crime’ does not reflect people’s actual expectation of becoming victims, so much as a wider set of anxieties about the social order (Innes and Fielding, 2010; Ditton *et al*, 1999; Farrell and Ditton, 1999). This was reflected in Rackhamshire. Participants tended to refer to wider perceptions of risk and danger, and a general sense of anxiety, or ascribed fear of crime to others - such as the elderly - rather than expressing concern about personal victimisation. The ‘signal crime’ perspective (Innes, 2005), which contributed to the original impetus behind neighbourhood policing, suggests that particular crimes can have disproportionate effects on different communities. In line with this perspective, the communities in this study were very aware of drug-related activities and their association with crime, and this appeared to have a strong effect on their sense of safety and security.

Community policing in Rackhamshire had a number of strengths. These included the strong

⁷ In England and Wales, an incident can be designated a hate crime if the offender has demonstrated or been motivated by hostility based on five protected characteristics: race, religion, disability, sexual orientation or transgender identity. College of Policing guidance as of 2020 states that hate crime should be treated as a priority (CoP, 2020).

partnerships formed with other agencies, commitment to facilitating a range of community engagement activities and the integration of special constables and volunteers. However, the capacity of community policing in Ruckhamshire to contribute to confidence was directly and adversely affected on several fronts by the financial context and the reorganisation of community policing instigated as a result of these pressures.

A lack of local tasking within CPTs and the need to consistently prioritise tasks from other areas of the organisation (such as more serious calls for service) meant that officers felt constrained in their ability to solve long-term problems. These findings reiterate results from previous studies of neighbourhood policing in England and Wales that have recommended strategies to reduce the demand on neighbourhood policing teams (MPS, 2015).

Officers felt that if they were given more autonomy within the organisation they would be more effective in achieving their objectives, which, in turn, would result in greater levels of public confidence. Residents were also keen to see community policing protected and teams given local autonomy in how to direct their time and what to prioritise. However, the re-establishment of neighbourhood policing as a ring-fenced specialism within the force would clearly have consequences for Ruckhamshire's ability to deal with issues such as hate crime, and it was not immediately clear how these might be resolved.

The importance of organisation buy-in cannot be underestimated. While neighbourhood policing teams and officers may be empowered and able to engage in community policing activities, this can be undermined if it is not acknowledged and prioritised across other parts of the organisation (Foster and Jones, 2010). Increasing demands on policing tend to put pressure on officers to move away from the valued and often "unmeasurable" activities of required in community policing (Hamilton-Smith *et al.*, 2014). This sentiment was reiterated

by CPT officers in this study who felt community policing was not prioritised due to its impact on crime prevention or public confidence being difficult to measure: “what counts can’t always be measured” (PC, D2).

The research presented here is limited in its scope, focused on one force; the samples of officers and residents included in the focus groups and interviews were also small. Yet the findings generated are similar to those found in other areas (Police Foundation 2020), suggesting a wider national relevance.

The Neighbourhood Policing Programme was rolled out nationally in 2005 at a time of considerable investment into policing and a political focus on confidence, community engagement, and tackling antisocial behaviour. Demand and national priorities have undoubtedly changed in that time. However, one of the most striking findings of this study is the extent to which the original model appeared to have retained its relevance. Police officers and residents consistently referred to visibility, familiarity, and accessibility; community engagement; and problem-solving, along with communication, as core elements of community policing. Further research could usefully return to these mechanisms to see if these are still crucial elements in supporting public confidence, or whether changes in demand and in crime have also affected public expectations of the police.

The changes to demand that forces are dealing with have therefore not led to concomitant changes to public perceptions of what the police should do, at least based on this small study of a provincial force. But they have, along with cuts and organisational changes, led to a profound alteration in Ruckhamsire police’s capacity to meet those expectations. In particular, the increasing difficulty in accessing police services appears to be actively damaging the sense of safety and security that residents feel in their communities. Confidence

may be 'sticky' and slow to change. However, the fears reflected in this study may be signals of wider problems for police legitimacy in the years ahead.

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Declaration of interest

No potential conflict of interest.

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Tables

Table I Participants

District	Data collection type	Number of participants
District 1	Focus group (CPT)	6
	Focus group (Residents)	7
	Focus group (Residents)	2
	Interview (CPT Inspector and Chief Inspector)	2
District 2	Focus group (CPT)	6
	Focus group (Residents)	8
	Interview (CPT Inspector)	1
District 3	Focus group (CPT)	3
<i>Total</i>	<i>8</i>	<i>35 (15 male 20 female)</i>