

## Evaluation of a contracted community policing experiment

In 2000, the Joseph Rowntree Housing Trust (JRHT) entered into a formal agreement with North Yorkshire Police to purchase an additional level of policing cover for the village of New Earswick. New Earswick is not a high crime area, and nor does it have high levels of social breakdown or neighbourhood disorder. Nevertheless, it reflects the kinds of concerns over security and the growing demands for reassurance policing that have become commonplace in many parts of Britain. Adam Crawford and Stuart Lister of the Centre for Criminal Justice Studies at the University of Leeds conducted a detailed three-year evaluation of this experimental initiative. The study found that:

-  Owing to a number of implementation difficulties, the initiative failed to meet its stated aims and was terminated early.
-  Crime and the fear of crime increased during the project's implementation, and residents' satisfaction with the local police declined.
-  The principal obstacles to success were:
  - lack of clarity from the outset as to how police time was to be used, and the roles and responsibilities of the different partners;
  - insufficient consideration given to what community policing would comprise and how it might achieve the project's aims;
  - ineffective management of residents' expectations of what the project could realistically deliver;
  - the manner in which the designated officer was drawn away from dedicated work within the village to cover for other colleagues or wider emergencies, since operational control remained within the police;
  - considerable turnover of police staff – three different community officers filled the designated post, and four different police managers oversaw the project's implementation;
  - lack of appropriate formal mechanisms for accounting for the service provided and the nature of any progress made.
-  The researchers conclude that the provision of additional policing and security measures may serve to heighten levels of anxiety and harden lines of difference among local people. The demand for policing or security solutions to local order problems may fail to tackle more fundamental social issues underlying these difficulties.

## Background

Over the last two decades, British policing provision has undergone major change. Increased use of technology and greater professionalisation have encouraged restructuring along more centralised, specialised and managerial lines. This has reduced the number of proactive, locally-tied community officers, not least because organisational imperatives are predominantly drafted in terms of reactive performance indicators.

The demand for a visible police presence has continued to rise, faster than the number of available police officers. National surveys suggest that the public have increasingly lost confidence in the capacity of the police, notably since the mid-1990s. Public satisfaction is lowest with regard to the level of foot patrols. Meeting public demands for visible patrols from within existing police resources is proving highly problematic. Hence a sizeable 'expectations gap' exists between public demand and the level of policing that the police are able to provide.

The emergence of this 'policing deficit' has fostered a growing market for additional patrolling and security provision, both human and technological. Visible patrolling now constitutes a central element of this emerging market, particularly with the dramatic expansion of the commercial security industry. This new market has provided residential communities and social landlords with new choices and opportunities concerning the provision of security. The manner in which the police adapt to this new scenario, in which their own efforts form only one part of the overall 'extended policing family', constitutes a central aspect of the unfolding shape of the local governance of crime and security.

One way in which the police have sought to adapt has been to compete within the emerging security market. The police have experimented with novel forms of service provision, involving financial and contractual arrangements with 'purchasers'. Legislative changes have enabled the police to generate income by selling aspects of their services, including the patrolling function. Section 9 of the Police and Magistrate's Courts Act 1994 provided the statutory basis for the police to charge more widely for service provision, significantly extending the scope for commercial activity.

## Contracted community policing – the New Earswick project

The New Earswick project aimed to contribute to a visible presence on the community's streets "as a means of providing reassurance and a source of security to the public". Under the contract for

additional community policing, JRHT purchased 24 hours of police time per week at a cost of £25,000 per year, for an initial three-year period. This time was to be in addition to any operational policing in the area (i.e. the usual reactive, round-the-clock cover and a limited amount of community policing). The contract specified that all operational and deployment decisions remained with the police, and that the designated police constable was to be "solely accountable to the police at all times".

About 18 months after the start of the project, JRHT decided that the initiative had not lived up to expectations, and exercised the option to end it almost a year earlier than originally anticipated. As a consequence, the New Earswick policing project joined a list of community-based crime prevention initiatives whose hopes and expectations have been undone largely by implementation failure.

## Impact on the community

During the project's first year, recorded crime figures fell slightly by 5 per cent on the previous year. However, during the second year, the overall number of recorded crimes rose by 99 per cent on the first year. Given the low level of crime in the village at the outset, the subsequent variations inherently appeared relatively dramatic. Much of the rise involved less serious crimes. Furthermore, recorded crime in the surrounding areas also rose during the initiative's second year, albeit less steeply. The policing initiative may have had a limited beneficial impact on recorded crime in the first six months of its implementation, but this appears to have worn off reasonably rapidly.

Two extensive surveys of local residents, conducted near the beginning and end of the initiative, revealed that:

- by the time of the second survey, between a third and a half of respondents felt that the initiative had been unsuccessful in meeting a variety of aims that residents had identified as relevant in the first survey;
- only two-fifths of respondents had seen the contracted community police officer in the previous year, and just over one-fifth had spoken to the officer;
- over three-fifths reported having had no direct contact with the community police officer over the lifetime of the project;
- 6 per cent found the police officer to be easier to contact during the initiative, but 17 per cent felt that he was less easy to contact;
- 16 per cent felt more likely to contact the police, but 10 per cent felt less likely to do so;
- respondents' level of satisfaction with local policing declined over the two surveys, from 31 to

22 per cent. Correspondingly, the percentage who felt dissatisfied increased from 30 to 40 per cent;

- during the life of the project, the percentage of residents who felt unsafe while out alone after dark in New Earswick increased, albeit slightly, from 37 to 43 per cent;
- in the second survey, 87 per cent of respondents agreed that there were not enough police on the streets of New Earswick;
- four-fifths agreed that the initiative had increased their desire for a greater level of visible patrolling in the village;
- over a third of respondents indicated that the initiative had increased their concerns over security and safety. This was reflected in the increased use or possession of a variety of security measures and devices.

An unintended consequence of the initiative was to raise the security threshold in the village, in that residents' perceptions of insecurity appeared to increase, as did their desire for security solutions. Towards the end of the project, a private security firm was hired to patrol the village, with local council funding, and JRHT installed new CCTV cameras.

### Managing expectations

The launch of the project stimulated a variety of expectations among residents regarding both the quantity and quality of policing, and the anticipated impact on crime, disorder and the quality of life within the village. Some of these expectations were unrealistic and extended beyond the project's specific aims. Expectations were also raised by lack of clarity over how the designated police officer was to use the time allocated to the village under the terms of the contract. This led to a number of misunderstandings about the initiative, which served to undermine perceptions of its success.

The above illustrates how an additional policing initiative has the capacity to fuel both realistic and unrealistic expectations. It also shows that those charged with the task of implementation must seek to manage appropriately the scope of community expectations. In New Earswick, the development of community hopes and aspirations was largely unmanaged. This created an 'expectations deficit', which the project consistently struggled with. Moreover, the commercial nature of the arrangement tended to change the relationship between residents and the police. It raised expectations as to the standards of service delivery and the manner in which the police should account for the service provided. Unwittingly, policing as a commodity arising from a commercial contract seemed to transform the residents into 'consumers' of a purchased good, with

increased expectations of the purchaser-provider relationship.

Lack of clarity about the project's purpose and method gave significant discretion – as well as considerable responsibility – to the individual frontline police officers implementing the initiative. This resulted in personal traits and characteristics overly determining the nature of the policing service delivered. It also led to divergent demands on the designated officer(s), which raised questions as to whether the amount of time purchased was sufficient to make a significant impact. Regardless of the implementation obstacles, the intensity of the intervention may have been too small-scale to deliver the desired outcomes. Multiple aims may have spread the resource too thinly to have a significant impact, and further fuelled unrealistic expectations.

### Staff turnover

The contract specified the employment of a single designated police officer, so that this officer would be familiar and accessible to village residents. It was hoped that this would better enable the officer to understand the particular needs and problems of the community. These aspirations were largely undone by the high turnover of staff filling the post. During the project, three different officers assumed the community policing post. This unforeseen level of turnover hindered the construction of mutually beneficial relations and went some way towards undermining the initiative's capacity to meet its objectives for providing reassurance.

The emphasis on familiarity with an individual officer also inevitably placed considerable importance on the personality of that officer. The absence of clear guidelines for the purchased activities and tasks added to the 'personalities' issue by giving each of these designated officers significant latitude over what they actually did with their allocated time in the village. Tying the purchased resource to a designated officer also meant that whenever that officer took sick leave or holidays, or attended training events and specialist postings, the village did not receive its contracted hours of community policing.

### Demands of public policing versus the private contract

A tension between the broad, generic demands of public policing and the narrow, parochial demands of the private contract served to undermine the initiative further. This tension was exacerbated by two specific factors. First, in comparison to some neighbouring communities, New Earswick is a relatively low crime area and its policing needs less immediate than in other areas where crime is a more serious problem. Secondly, community policing focused around

reassurance is, of necessity, a less pressing organisational priority than reactive 'crime management' policing. As public policing is largely incident-led, both of these factors tended to relegate the priority accorded to the initiative by the police, whose primary purpose is the provision of a *public* service.

Wider resourcing demands – particularly the policing of emergencies and major incidents – served to draw the designated officer(s) away from privately contracted duties in the village. The inflexibility of the police rota system represented an additional pressure which prioritised reactive policing duties at the expense of community-based policing.

### Managerial control and accountability

Operational control of the contracted officer remained with the police. As a result, JRHT as the purchaser and the residents of New Earswick as the beneficiaries found themselves in the position of purchasing a commodity over which they had no control and little ownership. Direct accounting for the designated officer's activities was limited. When it did occur formally, it was retrospective, explanatory and largely related to crime management incidents. There was little long-term problem-solving analysis or feedback for reassurance-type activities. This does not mean that no such activities took place during the life of the initiative, merely that the processes of measurement and accounting were not made sufficiently explicit. The resulting tensions underlined that action plans and forms of accounting needed to be clarified at the outset.

### Conclusions

The researchers conclude that the above findings have broader implications:

- In delivering community policing, an appropriate balance needs to be struck between the reactive duties of officers in responding to incidents, and their more proactive roles of reassurance and crime prevention. Community policing requires police forces to look to problem-oriented solutions which draw on community capacity and local knowledge, rather than relying on existing organisational remedies.
- Police forces need to consider how they can sell a public resource (police time) without having an adverse impact on the wider policing service or undermining service purchasers' expectations of control and ownership when the resource is pulled into wider policing demands. Where managerial control of the contracted resource remains with

the police, consideration should be given to clarifying mechanisms and forms of accountability.

- The provision of additional policing raises questions about the equitable distribution of security. There may be an adverse impact on surrounding areas where additional security is absent, reinforcing the notion of policing and security as a commodity available only to those able to afford it.
- Responding to public demands for greater security by providing additional policing or security hardware may fail to engage with the issues underlying these demands. It may also miss the opportunity to subject these demands to rational debate and local dialogue. Seeking solutions to problems of local order through policing and security alone may serve to exacerbate residents' fears and solidify lines of difference within and among local communities.

### About the project

Over a three-year period the study evaluated the implementation and impact of the contracted community policing initiative, using a variety of social research methods. The data collected combined police recorded crime figures and incident logs, together with extensive interviews with residents and stakeholders within and outside the village, the activities of the designated officers, and observational data. 'Baseline' and 'repeat' surveys were conducted, both of which elicited robust responses from approximately half of all households in the village.

### How to get further information

The full report, **Great expectations: Contracted community policing in New Earswick** by Adam Crawford, Stuart Lister and David Wall, is published by the Joseph Rowntree Foundation (ISBN 1 85935 147 6, price £13.95).