

POLICE OFFICER AND COMMUNITY PERCEPTIONS OF THE OPERATION AND IMPACT OF THE COMMUNITY ENGAGEMENT MODEL IN FIFE

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Summary: During 2008 and 2009 Fife Constabulary introduced the Community Engagement Model (CEM), based broadly on the Chicago Alternative Policing Strategy (CAPS), and its core elements of community engagement meetings, decentralization of responsibility, and the adoption of a problem-solving approach. In 2011/12 two phases of research into Fife Constabulary's (CEM) were conducted. The first phase examined the perceptions of a selection of community officers in two case study areas (North East Fife and Levenmouth), using semi-structured interviews. Officers identified a range of positive outcomes from the CEM (including improved relationships with partner agencies and communities, improved opportunities for community intelligence gathering, reduced calls for assistance and decreased levels of crime and disorder) but also identified challenges with regard the long-term sustainability of the CEM, particularly in low crime areas. They also raised concerns about the use of quantitative performance indicators, such as meeting attendance, for measuring the success the CEM. The second phase of the research examined issues of community attendance at the engagement meetings and community perceptions of the processes of priority setting and problem resolution. Community representatives were generally very positive about the impact of the CEM in terms of making officers more accessible and getting them to 'see like a citizen', and creating opportunities to identify local priorities in relation to those signal crimes and disorders which generate most fear, anxiety and anger, and receive feedback on how the police are tackling them. It is also clear that the discussions around local priorities represent only the "tip of the iceberg" of officer–community interaction at CEM meetings and that they now play a much broader role in terms of encouraging the co-production of safety in local communities in Fife.

INTRODUCTION

During 2008 and 2009 Fife Constabulary introduced the Community Engagement Model (CEM), based broadly on the Chicago Alternative Policing Strategy (CAPS), and its core elements of community engagement meetings, decentralization of responsibility, and the adoption of a problem-solving approach. There is now a dedicated Community Policing Division in Fife, with 159 community officers in specific community policing teams across the force area. Each area holds police-led community engagement meetings every two months at which local priorities are determined by the police and community and actions to resolve problems are reviewed.

We conducted two phases of research into the CEM. Phase one, carried out between January and April 2011, examined police officers' perceptions of the operation and impact of the community engagement model. Based on interviews with officers in two adjacent but contrasting case study areas (North East Fife and Levenmouth), this qualitative study provides an insight into officers' perceptions of where and why the CEM is working well and identifies areas where they have concerns; it also provides some comparative data with Chicago. Phase two, carried out between June and December 2011 and using the same case study areas, sought to examine community perceptions of the model using qualitative data drawn from observations at 18 CEM meetings, interviews with 11 community participants, questionnaires completed by 130 CEM meeting attendees, and analysis of attendance sheets of 56 meetings and other Fife Constabulary data. This briefing paper provides a short summary of our findings; the full report is available on the SIPR website (Hunter and Fyfe, 2012).

Figure 1: The “cyclical process” of the Community Engagement Model (Source: Fife Constabulary).



CEM MEETINGS: AWARENESS AND ATTENDANCE

At each community engagement meeting an attendance sheet is completed, priorities from the previous meetings are reviewed and either agreed as being resolved or further actions are discussed, and new priorities (up to three) identified. Those who have previously attended are emailed in advance of each meeting; where an email address is not held, officers are responsible for phoning attendees. Improved diverse efforts are required to reach the majority of the public who have never attended meetings.

In Chicago, “The CAPS Implementation Office eventually expanded to a staff of eighty-eight. Each police district had several community organisers and a service coordinator. [...] By 1999, the Implementation Office had a budget of about nine million dollars” (Skogan, 2006, p. 57). Fife has 64 areas (plus high schools and a University); each area has up to three priorities with up to four actions, and updates on priorities and actions are updated on the website. The burden of administration may fall to officers as numbers of police staff are being cut across Scotland.

The CEM tends to have a strong focus on those local “signal” crimes and disorders that generate most fear, anxiety and anger and therefore have a negative impact on quality of life. All officers interviewed in phase one of this project could identify positive outcomes that they attributed to the CEM. They also recognised that many of its successes were difficult to measure using existing, largely quantitative, performance indicators and felt “pressure from above” to achieve the primary quantitative indicator, being the number of members of the public who attend community engagement meetings. One officer stated:

You’ve got to be very careful, I think, that the fact that you’re not getting a particularly good turn out reflects that there’s bad community engagement.

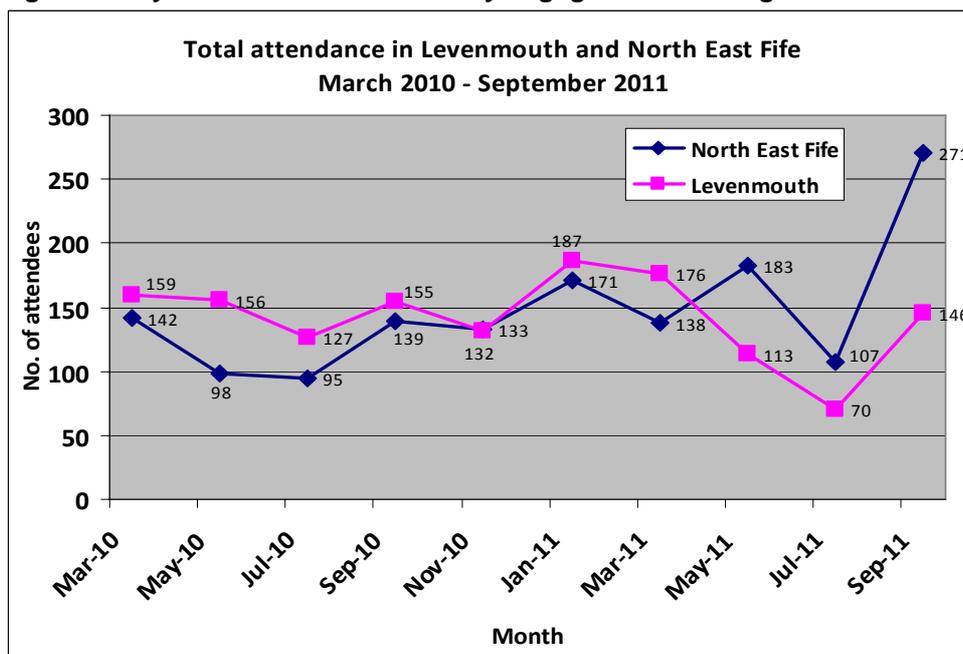
Low attendance may be a reflection of previous success in resolving issues, or of low levels of crime and disorder, or high public satisfaction. This is mirrored in Chicago:

CAPS involvement was highest in the places that needed it most. [...] The bad news is that attendance is driven by crime; the good news is that residents in many of the city’s most troubled neighborhoods had a place to go and get help. (Skogan 2006, p. 56)

We studied the make-up of community participants at meetings, in terms of age, gender, and if they were representing others and not only their own perceived needs for their area. All attendees are a mix of local residents and those attending on behalf of an organisation, such as Fife and local community councillors, the business community and representatives from local schools and churches. In Levenmouth, the majority of attendees, 77%, were residents and 23% were representatives; in North East Fife 55% were residents and 45% representatives. Regarding the age and gender profile of community participants, from the questionnaire survey distributed to meetings attendees ($n = 130$) we found a majority of attendees were female (53% in Levenmouth

and 64% in North East Fife) and aged over 55 (55% in Levenmouth and 63% in North East Fife). Looking at both case study sites together, we found that most first time attendees were there because they had a specific issue to raise, and most serial attendees (five or more meetings) defined themselves as being a local representative. In community interviews, representatives stated that they saw themselves as conduits between the police and the community, with a responsibility to represent others at the meetings, record and report back what had taken place. Figure 2 shows the number of attendees at CEM meetings in Levenmouth and North East Fife from March 2010 to September 2011 (an average of attendance of 11 per meeting), showing some fluctuations around events or seasons.

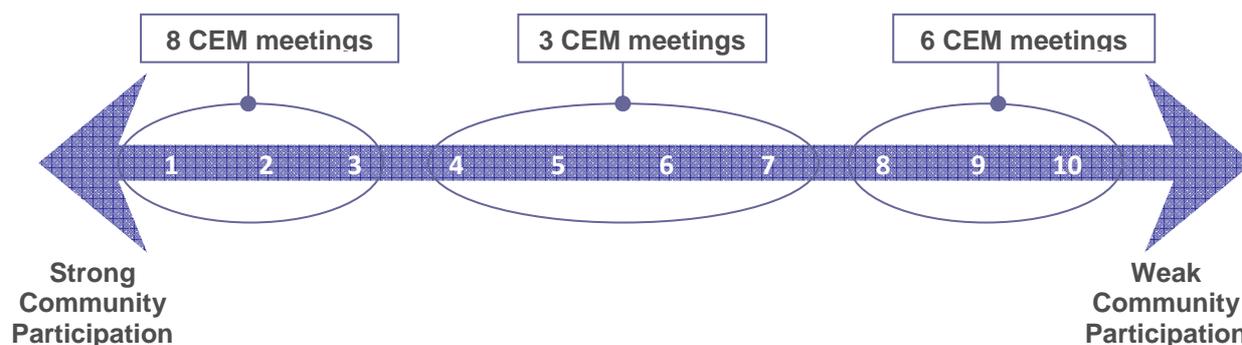
Figure 2: Average monthly attendance of community engagement meetings in the case study sites



THE OPERATION OF CEM MEETINGS

Meetings are held in a variety of venues, from church halls, community halls and centres, police stations, schools, libraries, colleges and clubs. As outside observers attending the meetings, we found the venue details published on the Fife Constabulary website to be limited; postcodes and sometimes street names are not provided. From observing 18 meetings, we found a wide variety of seating formations and meeting dynamics, ranging from strong community participation to relatively weak participation (Figure 3). It would be incorrect to conclude that weak community participation is simply due to the role of the officer, but their skill as a facilitator of discussion via their verbal and non-verbal communication skills is an important factor.

Figure 3: Strength of community participation in CEM meetings (from observations of 18 meetings).



One officer described a meeting in North East Fife:

What we normally do is run through priorities that we've set from the previous meeting, and run through what we've done, and any good news stories in relation to the problems that they've been having. They then get to tell us their opinions on what we've done and what they still find a problem or raise any new issues, and they decide what would be their priorities. Obviously we've got a bit of influence as well if we think there's still more we could be doing.

Some officers were concerned that poor attendance may mean that few members of a community may dictate the priorities of the many. As one officer stated:

largely speaking, because of the poor attendance, it's very few people in a community that dictate what that community's priorities are.

However, community members who did attend can be defined as "active citizens" (van Stokkom, 2011) acting as neighbourhood managers who communicate results to the "passive citizens"; the vast majority who do not attend the meetings. This was reflected in comments from community interviewees:

I have friends who say: "I'm friends with you because you know everything that's happening, with the school, or this..." and I say "well, come out and join!" "No, no, I don't have time for that; you can fill me in." (Heather, North East Fife)

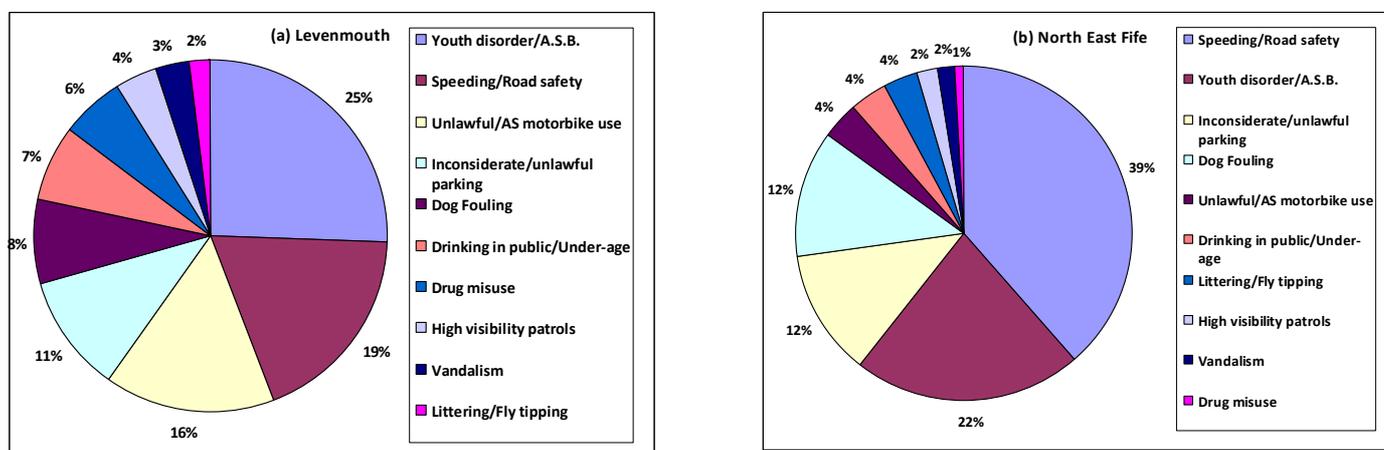
I wouldn't bother going if I was just a resident, but because I'm on the community council... (Barbara, North East Fife)

I'm actually going as a group rather than as an individual. (Alison, Levenmouth)

A TRIO OF PRIORITIES

Common priorities include speeding, anti-social behaviour and dog fouling. To a large extent these concerns can be read as "signal" crimes or signal disorders which generate feelings of fear, anxiety and anger among local residents (Innes and Fielding, 2002). Despite diverse local contexts, many areas in both case study sites shared priorities to some extent, but there were differences in the frequency of priorities being resolved, or swapped, when a more pressing issue arose. We found that in Strathkinness (North East Fife), for example, there were no "resolved" priorities because the community had chronic low level problems (speeding and dog fouling) which were never resolved. In Kennoway (Levenmouth) in contrast, the three current priorities (anti-social behaviour, drug misuse and illegal use of motorbikes) had each previously been "resolved" as many as five times. The continual cycle of resolution of priorities may mask the need for a more intensive longer term problem-solving approach involving partner agencies. Figure 4 shows that Levenmouth and North East Fife share their top ten priorities but in a different order.

Figure 4: Top ten priorities set by communities in (a) Levenmouth from October 2008 to December 2011 and (b) in North East Fife from January 2010 to December 2011. Source: Fife Constabulary website/Policing Your Area.



Up to three priorities are identified at meetings but other problems raised are not neglected, as one officer from Levenmouth explained:

the fact that three priorities are picked, doesn't mean that we ignore everything else, because if there's an emerging issue that might just affect one family, we can sort that out.

In Levenmouth, one officer credited the CEM in resolving both large and small scale problems:

It depends what you mean by a "major" success, because to Mary Smith, her next door neighbour's dog not crapping on her driveway every day is a major success. To us it's a very small thing but to her it's a huge thing. At the height of this [problem site] we couldn't send in a single crewed officer into that street, because whenever we sent a vehicle in somebody had to stay with the vehicle, because if they didn't it got destroyed. Quite often you would have to send two or three up – two officers to deal with the incident, one to babysit the vehicles. And at that, you'd get gangs of forty youths, out their face on drink wanting to come and have a go with you. The High Schools – we dinnae have the running battles with bairns with sticks that we used to have on a regular basis, so that's improved. But it's all relative; what do you consider a major success? It gets back to old Mary with the dog crapping on her driveway – because we found out who the dog owner is and had a word in his ear "cut it out or else"; Mary's delighted, so....

Priority setting and resolution: The tip of the iceberg?

At the meetings we observed, the discussion around priority setting and feedback was often merely the "tip of the iceberg" with many more issues which were having a significant impact or were of critical interest to the community topics being discussed. This echoes the experience in Chicago, where the Chicago police department recognised that the implementation of CAPS would result in an "expansion of the police mandate" (Skogan 2006, p. 179):

At community meetings, residents complain about bad buildings, noise, and people fixing their cars on the curb, not just about burglary. If police reply "that's not our responsibility" and try to move on, no one will come to the next meeting. (Ibid, p. 8)

CEM meetings are successful in providing a unique community forum for discussion and the sharing of information. Several community interviewees document meetings they attend and report back to the groups they represent, but no public record or representation of the true business of the meeting is made available; the website merely records priorities and feedback on their resolution. This diminishes the impact of the meetings and does not fairly represent the work of community officers.

THE IMPACT OF THE CEM

The police officers we interviewed were universally positive about the impact of the CEM on police–community relations; specifically in improved relations with younger people, helping to "take the heat off" neighbourhood disputes and therefore response officers' workload, identifying perpetrators due to local knowledge, reducing the number of meetings officers have to attend, and gathering intelligence from the community. To quote one officer:

In terms of the strengths, you're close to your community, everybody knows that they can meet the police face to face in their own particular areas on a particular time and day. If they can't make the meeting then they can contact the police by phone or by email and it's a two way process; and it's the same community police officers that are at these meetings. They get to be known by name, and when the community sees their own officers walking the beat they know who they are and what they're up to, and they can get updates at the meeting or in the street.

Some had reservations about performance measurement, the sustainability of the model in lower crime areas, the attitude of some response colleagues, the interface between the Force Call Centre and community teams, abstractions and the resilience of CEM administration.

The majority of community members we interviewed were also positive; they were appreciative of the fact that they knew who their local officer was and how to contact them, and generally full of praise for the qualities which made their community officers successful, using terms such as: approachable, genuine, open, compliant, proactive, down to earth, high profile, make people feel comfortable; “they are ideally suited to the job they do.” Their local knowledge provided reassurance; one interviewee who had recently attended her first meeting said she found it “quite comforting” and “I certainly cannae praise it enough, I think it was brilliant.” (Justine, Levenmouth)

There were also critical comments from the community interviewees; regarding the transfer of officers resulting in a loss of local knowledge, lack of partnership working in some areas, and unstaffed police stations. Most seriously, when community participants perceive individual officers as being unresponsive to their concerns, this can effect a negative assessment of the CEM for them and for those whom they inform:

I just got the impression from him that really not a lot was going to happen. He also threw in a lot of facts and figures about how few police we actually have in the area and how they're deployed, and I just thought is there a point? It doesn't look like they're going to do anything. It was him that made me think "is there a point to this?" [...] I feel very disheartened after the last meeting; I wonder really if there is any point in actually going to them; which is a shame. (Stella. North East Fife)

CONCLUSIONS

Like CAPS in Chicago, Fife Constabulary have succeeded in achieving a “transformational” change in how policing is delivered to its communities (Skogan, 2004). The force has restructured and reprioritised its working model to achieve a change which is robust and sustainable; this is no token effort or box ticking exercise. CEM meetings are a highly valued mechanism among community participants for engaging with their local police officers and provide a forum for police–community–partner agency relationships, thus playing an important role in encouraging the co-production of community safety.

The key challenges ahead lie at a macro level in maintaining the CEM in a new era of police austerity and reform; and at a micro level, in informing and involving a greater number of the Fife public. In doing so the CEM can deliver greater value for money by showing there is substance and value in the meetings; it is serving the community beyond the narrow measures of police performance (re priority resolution) and is (to quote on questionnaire respondent) “not just a paper exercise.”

SOURCES OF FURTHER INFORMATION

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