POLICE-PUBLIC CONSULTATION FORUMS IN EDINBURGH

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Summary: In 2010, as part of Lothian And Borders Police's new Safer Neighbourhood Team (SNT) model, police-public consultation forums were established across Edinburgh. While such consultation forums had been trialled or experimented with in the past, the local 'priority-setting' forums (as they became known by), reflected the strongest commitment yet by Lothian & Borders Police to local police-public consultation. Conducting research between June 2011 and February 2013, I observed the progress and development of the forums. While facing many of the common problems that often hamper local police-public consultation – low public attendance, poor representation from key groups, too much deference to police authority, occasional diplomatic mishandling of public by police representatives – the forums still offer good value for enhancing local policing. In some locations which have had difficult or tense histories with the police, the consultation forums offered the greatest value for improving local police-public relations. Moreover, in many other areas, the forums were seen as effective and useful by both police and public representatives alike.

INTRODUCTION

As outlined by Fyfe (2013: p.10), the move to a single national police force raises a number of challenges regarding engagement with local concerns. The experiences of Denmark and Finland, for example, suggest the move to national structures can raise issues around local democratic accountability and legitimacy (Fyfe, 2013: p.10). This research focused on the experience of local police-public consultation within Lothian and Borders Police in the period immediately before the move to a single force. The fieldwork was conducted between June 2011 and February 2013, with the aim of evaluating the consultation forums for their democratic value, as well as their contributions to local police legitimacy and ability to reform local policing. In each of these respects, I observed significant progress and indications that local consultation can prove a useful tool for improving local policing. These improvements however, must be seen in respect to common shortcomings that also undermine the value of the forums: low public attendance, poor representation from key groups, too much deference to police authority, and occasional mishandling of the public by police representatives. Regardless, I argue that local consultation forums have a key role to play in sustaining local relationships during the transition to a single national force.

The forums emerged as part of Lothian and Borders Police's 'Safer Neighbourhood Team' model (SNT) which launched citywide in September 2010. The SNT model must be seen within the context of national pushes towards 'community policing' style approaches. Community policing across Scotland had been seen as "patchy" and uneven (Henry and Mackenzie, 2009: p.27), and it had been established by both Her Majesty's Inspectorate of Constabulary in Scotland (HMICS, 2004) and a Justice Committee Inquiry (Justice Committee Report, 2008), that there needed to be a more cohesive and dedicated approach to community policing across Scotland. The response of Lothian and Borders Police was to establish the SNT model and one of its key features was the local consultation forums (or 'local priority-setting groups' as they were often known as).

I interviewed over 40 stakeholders in the consultation process including representatives from Lothian and Borders Police, City of Edinburgh Council, as well as many public participants. I focused my research effort solely on Edinburgh and covered the spread of consultation forums across the city. There were initially ten priority-setting meetings hosted across the city in catchment areas of approximately 20,000 to 60,000 people. I covered eight of the ten territories attending 10 sessions of meetings for observation. The following section outlines my principal findings.

MAJOR FINDINGS (Key points in BOLD)

Previous research on local police-public consultation forums highlight a number of their shortcomings. For instance, consultation has been said to be devalued as it commonly only involves a small and unrepresentative section of the community (Elliot and Nicholls, 1996: p.10; Jones and Newburn, 2001: p.v; Mistry, 2007: p.3, Myhill, 2007: p.175). Moreover, there is said to be a damaging inequality of power and knowledge that favours the police and weakens public participation (Elliot and Nicholls, 1996: p.11; Skogan *et al.*, 2000; Mistry, 2007: p.5). Additionally, police commitment can often be partial, reluctant, and commonly unskilled (Elliot and Nicholls, 1996: p.14; Home Office, 2003: p.4-5, Skogan, 2006: p.69, Myhill, 2007: p.176). Finally, there are also practical difficulties with maintaining group cohesion and sustainability over a prolonged period of time (Skogan *et al.*, 2000).

Edinburgh's police-public consultation forums shared a number of the common problems identified elsewhere. Chief amongst which is the issue of low attendance and often poor representation. Across Edinburgh, the turnout is low, and often abysmally low. The most successful meetings have attendances of around 20 when you include the police, council, public participants, as well as invited members of partner organisations. The least successful have around six or eight, and notably, police Sergeants have mentioned dismal occasions when only one or two people have attended. This compares poorly with other areas of Scotland which as research by Fyfe and Hunter (2012) shows, attendances often ranged between 16 and 42 for similar meetings across Fife. The low level of public attendance is seen as a major drawback to local consultation by the police:

> There is no point if two or three people attend. Then you will only ever deal with their issues and I don't really think that is high enough up the scale – 'thanks for coming, but I'm not really going to listen to what you are saying because that would be wrong.'
>
> *SNT Sergeant*

Members of the public were also concerned about the attendances, and how representative they are:

> We can only speak for the people who come to the meetings, and its probably not a very good cross-section. Tends to be one or two business people, and the elderly, and the people who have been 'on the go' for years. It tends to be young people who don't come.
>
> *Public Participant*

Along with young people often not being represented, one Chief Inspector identified that the police had a problem with getting black and minority ethnic (BME) groups to attend. Certain groups were disinterested in engaging with the police and often recent immigrants could carry suspicions of the police based on their experiences in their origin countries.

Attendance is low and this is an area that needs to be improved upon. Furthermore, as has been commonly identified, widening access to 'hard-to-reach' groups can always be improved (Jones and Newburn, 2001). Despite this, the forums were popularly considered as having value. Over time, priority-setting groups matured and grew in size and representatives from minority community groups did mention that those who engaged generally saw the process in a positive light. Furthermore, there should be consideration for the 'amplification effect', as many active individuals passed information to fellow community members and connected others to the consultation process. Individuals reported back and shared information with Community Councils, Neighbourhood Watches, or other Community and Third-sector organisations. This 'amplification effect' is modest, but has been also recognised by other research (Fyfe and Hunter, 2012: p.4).

As other scholars have identified, there is a danger in placing too much emphasis on participation and attendance as a measure of the success of such forums (Jones, Newburn, and Smith, 1996: p.193; Skogan, 2006; Carr, 2012; Fyfe and Hunter, 2012: p.2). This research would agree and point towards the other forms of value the forums offer. For instance, **in contradiction to some of the arguments in the literature which**

suggest that forms of community policing may 'work best, where it is needed least' (Waddington, 1999: p.213; McConville and Shepherd, 1992; Hope, 1995), the indications in the case of Edinburgh is that the most notable and pronounced successes are in some of the most deprived and most contentious policing neighbourhoods.

For example, in two notable major areas of the city with a significant population of residents living in both the top 5% and 10% of the National Index of Multiple Deprivation (Scottish Government, 2012), and which have histories of poor police-public relations, the forums are said to have played a key role in supporting a recent improvement in relationships. Both areas had a similar 'no grass' culture according to residents, whereby cooperation with the police was stigmatised, and this was often a result of what residents felt was overly aggressive policing styles. As one experienced community activist and resident from one of these areas noted:

> Well, I think it is - how to say - the police have taking a more philosophical attitude to it. So they've said, okay, not everybody in any given area is mad, bad, or any other, so we must police accordingly. And I think that is what has happened. What (it) is now is, community bobbies-on-the-beat, and the community safety team are engaged in talking more than fighting – it's not a world war type of thing, and in that respect, that's a good thing.

> *Public Participant*

This has been corroborated from the police perspective as they have seen notable improvements in feedback when doing door-to-door inquiries in these areas. The forums, in this regard, have been seen to provide "previously unimaginable" (Public Participant) levels of cooperation between residents and the police, which is also said to have led to crime control dividends. For instance, a group of women within one of these communities was concerned about local drug-dealers who had carried out a number of assaults and commanded fear and intimidation in the area. Owing to the traditionally poor relationship with the police, and the local "no-grass culture", this particular group of women was reluctant to speak with the police directly for fear of reprisals and stigma. A solution was able to be found, however, owing much to the new partnerships and community connections established through the forums. A local 'third-sector' community group, and forum participant, was able to act as a mediator between the police and the women. Behind closed-doors, and in secretly organized encounters, the women were able to discuss with the police 'off the record' about the state of fear and victimisation in the community. As a direct result of these meetings, the police were able to gather the required intelligence they needed to pursue house-raids and prosecutions relating to drug offences on the offending individuals. The point to consider is that relationships established at the priority-setting meetings encouraged connections between the police and organised groups in the community, which then unexpectedly precipitated in secondary connections with other individuals who would not have previously engaged with the police at all.

This is just one example of how 'previously unimaginable' levels of cooperation are being encouraged within difficult policing contexts. It should be noted at this stage that it is hard to make a direct causal claim as to the relevance of the forums role in this regard. The forums are just one strand of wider social and policy change. However, it is striking to many who work and live in such areas that there has been a lot of progress in relations between the police and the public in very recent years, and the consultation forums have been cited as a possible key reason for supporting this transformation. As one resident and forum participant expresses it:

> All sorts of different things are happening, that a decade ago you wouldn't get happening. And that is solely down to the police and the youth services picking up the approach and the marriage of the [priority-setting] group and the local authorities and the groups we've brought in. So it's very much a good feeling to actually be involved in that, and a good thing to shout about it.

> *Public participant*

However, there were other aspects of the forums that hampered the overall quality and purpose of the process. For instance, **there could often be too much deference to police authority on the part of the public**. In this regard the public could often 'genuflect' before the "authority and wisdom" of the police (Hughes, 2007: p.74).

This is a product of the inequality of knowledge and power between the police and public. It can often diminish the confidence of the public and reduce the process to a ceremonial approval of police interest. This was reflected in what some participants reported about the meetings:

> I got the impression from the group… that [they] weren't going to contradict the priorities the police thought were the better ones
>
> *Public Participant*

Likewise, **the police could often use statistics or protected knowledge to assert authority over the group that some found questionable**:

> We did have [one] Sergeant who tried to dictate the action and he used figures to batter the community around the head with it. And we didn't agree with a lot of the figures he brought in. It's about perception, it's about what we see as a community and what they say as the data, and in my view, it's what the community perceives, because they are the greater body.
>
> *Public Participant*

The forums are supposed to establish an equal footing between the police and the public, but in reality the police can often manage the meetings in their favour because of a mixture of public deference, symbolic authority, and access to privileged information or statistics. Without a good balance of discussion the forums can be reduced to rubber-stamping the police agenda.

Furthermore, **individuals within the police could often be ill-prepared, unskilled, and occasionally mishandle the relationship with the public**. For instance, one participant reported:

> The previous Sergeant had his own little hobby-horses and the things he was interested in. And he put up with a lot of waffle, which he shouldn't have…the (new) Sergeant: he's got more professional dynamism, and he's taken more of a lead. The previous chap has been much more – difficult to explain; it was a personality thing; he was a bit more yappy…but the new Sergeant is much more strategic.
>
> *Public Participant*

One participant outlined how in an area of historically low police-public cooperation, a local Inspector badly mishandled the consultation group by taking too aggressive an approach:

> We've had some not-so-good senior police coming along to the meetings. There was one who came along, who tried to play the hard card – 'if you don't phone, we won't help'. And it got the stage where she was preaching to a whole load of people who would do that. So she was preaching to the wrong arena. So she actually alienated a lot of people who were like 'well if that's your attitude it's no wonder'…it was a real shoot yourself in the foot occasion.
>
> *Public participant*

The mistake this Inspector made was to lecture, rather than show sympathy and the required diplomacy towards the public. The Inspector also failed by not grasping the shared frustration others had with the local 'no grass' culture, and instead choose to be unsympathetic and lacked the tactfulness required.

Another aspect of the forums that concerned public participants was that the police and council could change the terms of their participation at a moments notice. For instance, during the period of my research, two of the priority-setting meetings were merged into one. This was done without community consultation:

> We weren't consulted about any of these changes by the council. This was a *fait accompli* as far as we are concerned. Which I've no doubt they've consulted others, but we weren't.
>
> *Public Participant*

At the inaugural meeting of the consolidated-group, concerns were raised by one member of the public that they didn't approve of the merging of the groups and felt it would interrupt the previous work and relationships forged with local police (fieldnotes, March 2012). The merging of the groups possibly meant a concerning shift away from local needs to a wider, more general focus. The point to be taken from this unilateral decision was that it served as a reminder to participants that the public authorities (the police and the council) make the executive decisions on the terms of their participation and can change their format of engagement at any time.

In conclusion, despite the shortcomings of the meetings, the consultation forums were popular with those involved. For both the police representatives and the public participants, the meetings were seen as a positive and welcome change. Even for those seasoned community activists who have experienced consultation with the police in the past, the priority-setting meetings under the SNT model reflects a much stronger and more convincing commitment than some of the previous, weaker attempts. **In the view of this research, local police-public consultation forums have value to offer in the new landscape of Scottish Policing as a tactic for improving local policing, local police legitimacy, and supporting the credentials of democratic policing. In this period of centralization for Scottish policing it is appropriate that efforts and attempts to secure local consultation and engagement are not lost in the transition.** It is debated in the literature whether the merging of police forces can damage local relationships (for a summary, see Mendel and Fyfe, 2011: p.7-9). While no clear consensus emerges from the literature on this issue, there is "no inherent characteristic of large police forces" which prevents them from providing effective local policing (Mendel and Fyfe, 2011: p.8). The continued, sustained and potentially expanded use of local consultation forums could serve as a means for securing local policing in response to the merging of Scotland's forces. As I found, Lothian and Borders Police were making significant progress in this area prior to centralization and it would be unfortunate if changes to the force structure interfered with this process.

Consultation forums offer an effective way of improving local policing if implemented with suitable commitment and institutional support. To finish, the following quote from a local member of the BME community aptly summaries both the potential success the forums can secure as well as the frustrating limitations that they currently face:

> I think it is fair to say there is evidence actually that members of the community and individuals who show up at the meetings, and get to build-up a relationship with the officers – its human nature you start off being a bit distant - and after meeting a few times you get to hear what the other side is saying. So I think there has been movement on both sides from members of the community, as well as police officers. So my view would certainly be that things have gotten a bit better. And probably my dissatisfaction – if you like – is that I know there is a bigger wider circle out there. And I can see the attitudes shifting in people who come to the group, but I'm sure there are dozens of people and families who don't come to the group and have no idea it is going on and can't benefit from it.
>
> *Public Participant*

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