

Research on

The Effectiveness of Policing Committees

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1. Introduction

In March 2017, the Northern Ireland Policing Board (NIPB) commissioned Ulster University to conduct a research project examining the effectiveness of the Policing Committees of Policing and Community Safety Partnerships (PCSPs) and District Policing and Community Safety Partnerships (DPCSPs). The purpose of the project was to progress the development of a framework of indicators that would enable the Board to assess the effectiveness of Policing Committees in their oversight of local policing through conducting initial qualitative research. The research would explore potential links between the work of Policing Committees and the work of the Board in monitoring progress against targets in the Northern Ireland Policing Plan, and also were appropriate identify and disseminate good practice.

1.1 Understanding Policing Committees

PCSPs/DPCSPs were statutory bodies established in 2012 under the 2011 Justice Act. There are eleven PCSPs one for each of the District council areas. As well as having one overarching PCSP, Belfast has four DPCSPs-North, South, East and West. It was anticipated that the partnerships would provide a more integrated approach, bringing together in a single body the functions previously undertaken by the District Policing Partnerships (DPPs) and Community Safety Partnerships (CSPs).

In terms of membership and structure. A PCSP contains:

- 8, 9 or 10 Political Members (Councillors/Aldermen) nominated by the District Council;
- 7, 8 or 9 Independent Members appointed by the Policing Board;
- 7 Designated Members, representatives of statutory agencies formally designated by Order of the Department of Justice because of their contribution to local policing and community safety.

Each PCSP operates a Policing Committee, comprising of Political and Independent Members, with Designated Members strongly encouraged, but not obliged to attend. Duties include identifying priorities for consideration in the development of the local Policing Plan and gaining the co-operation of the public in terms of crime prevention. These functions are referred to as 'restricted functions', specific to the committee. The co-opting process is also laid out: PCSPs can co-opt persons to engage with appropriate local organisations and third sector bodies in delivering and monitoring tasks.

The NIPB recommended that the Policing Committee should facilitate a minimum of two public meetings each year on specific policing issues that may have aroused public interest or concern. The Policing Committee should consider that at least once a year the focus of the public meeting of a Policing Committee should be on police performance. Policing Committees are responsible for maintaining a close relationship between the police and local communities. Local meetings, at District Electoral Area (DEA) level, can be used to discuss where the greatest impact can be made. Other forums for inclusive discussions could be seminars and general public events. They should serve as advocates for policing and so that it adds value to the community.

As noted Policing Committees consist of Councillors and Independent Members 'to perform the more technical PSNI-monitoring functions inherited from the DPPs'.¹ Monitoring police performance is the central overarching role of the Committees, specifically in relation to the implementation of the district Policing Plan developed through consultation between the local police and the relevant Policing Committee.

The Criminal Justice Inspection Northern Ireland (CJINI), in reviewing the governance of PCSPs, noted that in discharging this monitoring and accountability function there was a high degree of variability in the nature and effectiveness of different district Policing Committees.² In particular, the structure and format of proceedings within Policing Committees was regarded as impacting on the overall effectiveness of the Committees in discharging their functions. Committees that focused on formal presentation of police statistics and limited discussion to low level operational matters were regarded as less effective. The CJINI concluded that Policing Committees should be less adversarial with monitoring and evaluation of police performance broadened from focus on individual transactions.³ The subjectivity of police crime statistics limits the capacity of Committees solely utilizing crime figures as indicative of police performance. Recorded crime cannot be considered as reflective of concerns within a community and consequently should not be regarded as illustrative of community safety.⁴

A key recommendation proposed by the CJINI to improve the effectiveness was to provide Policing Committees with enhanced support of crime analysts to assist with the interpretation and analysis of data.⁵ The overarching aim of increasing the expert support for Policing Committees was to enable the Committees to prepare quarterly evaluations of police performance with recommendations. 'The evaluation should include analysis of the agreed targets and measures and also a more reflective element of police process and attitude'.⁶

¹ Bowden and Topping, *Crime Prevention and Community Safety*, 2015: 212.

² CJINI, *Policing and Community Safety Partnerships*, 2014: 6.

³ CJINI, *Policing and Community Safety Partnerships*, 2014: 6.

⁴ CJINI, *Policing and Community Safety Partnerships*, 2014: 8.

⁵ CJINI, *Policing and Community Safety Partnerships*, 2014: 2.2.

⁶ CJINI, *Policing and Community Safety Partnerships*, 2014: 2.4.

1.2 Report structure

Our report begins with an overview of the methodology taken by the research team, followed by a section on the findings associated with the discussions with the Policing Committee Members. Following this, there is a section on the interviews with Police Commanders. The report concludes with a review of key emerging themes and a series of recommendations.

2. Methodology

The fieldwork element of the research project took place during March-September 2017, and involved a combination of interviews and focus groups with key stakeholders. Prior to the commencement of fieldwork, the research team met with NIPB representatives to discuss appropriate methodologies and potential participants. As a result, the following approach was adopted:

- Fifteen focus groups with representatives of the Policing Committees within the eleven PCSPs and the four DPCSPs in Belfast (ranged in size from three to thirteen participants per group);
- Ten interviews with PSNI commanders from the eleven policing districts in Northern Ireland;
- One meeting with independent members of the Northern Ireland Policing Board;
- Three interviews with Northern Ireland Policing Board officers.

The following questions supported the discussions with participants:

- Ascertain how Policing Committees currently monitor local police performance, and identify how this could be improved;
- Review the links that are made by Policing Committees in their monitoring of local crime and ASB to the work of other statutory agencies, and identify how these could be improved;
- Review the current mechanisms that are used by the Board to assess the effectiveness of Policing Committees;
- Identify support that could be put in place to increase the effectiveness of Policing Committees.

During the discussions the research team made hand written notes to document findings. From the analysis of these notes a series of themes emerged which have been outlined in the following chapters. It is important to note that, where appropriate, direct quotations have been used to illustrate the themes, however, none of these are attributable to person, organisation or geographical region.

3. Policing Committee findings

Interviews took place with members of the eleven Policing Committees and four DPCSPs in Belfast. The conversations focused on the nature of the relationships between the committees and the local PSNI, the challenges and successes of their collaboration and partnerships, and areas of potential improvement. The following sections draw on these discussions and identify several themes, which capture the Members (both Independent and Elected) overall views of working alongside the PSNI at the local level. Where appropriate, direct un-attributable quotations from participants have been used to illustrate the key themes.

Two general points can be made at the outset. For many participants in this study there was *no consistent or clear difference between the Policing Committee and PCSPs*:

- Many participants had to be reminded on numerous occasions that the research was only concerned with Policing Committees and not PCSPs;
- Several participants (and members of Policing Committees) had to be reminded what a Policing Committee was in terms of role and function;
- On several occasions members used the terms PCSP and Policing Committee interchangeably without noting there was any difference.

Secondly, while there were consistent *themes* across the Districts there was also *marked variation in approach and self-assessed effectiveness between different Policing Committees*:

- The organisational relationship of the Policing Committees to their PCSPs varied by District. Some held Policing Committee meetings after PCSP meetings on a monthly basis, others held them before PCSP meetings and others had specific nights for Policing Committee and PCSP meetings. A number of Policing Committees indicated that the arrival of the new Council structure had created new internal tensions and a sense of distance from local communities. Others indicated that Council issues predominated and that operational local issues oftentook priority over strategic partnership on key priorities with the police;
- District Councils organise their local policing consultation processes on a different basis. Some have formal DEA meetings, whereas others are organised on a thematic basis. In almost every case, the PCSP is profiled as a PCSP with no specific or separate identity for the Policing Committee. Policing consultation at local level is therefore dependent less on policing needs than on Council structures;

- In a lot of cases relationships and effectiveness were determined by the approach of the District Commander, the management of the PCSP and the relationships between Elected Members of the PCSP and Independent Members;
- The turnover of District Police Commanders was a concern for many Policing Committees. Relationships established with individuals were seen as important and yet subject to unpredictable and destabilising change. Furthermore, Commanders clearly took a variety of approaches to their Policing Committees with some bringing local inspectors and others preferring to attend the meetings without other officers present. There does not appear to be clear organisational consistency in approach;
- There was also a suggestion that linkages and partnerships between the DPCSP's and the Belfast PCSP could be improved. Participants talked about the difficulties in having representation at the Belfast-wide forum if their designated person to attend was unwell or simply unable to attend. Furthermore, participants felt there could be stronger communications and more opportunities to develop work together across the four areas;
- Most Policing Committees were highly appreciative of their PCSP Managers, recognising their critical role in liaising, managing and co-ordinating the PCSP. However, there were concerns that PCSP Managers were in practice Council staff operating within a Local Council reporting framework and within a Council culture of working with much weaker institutional connection to the NIPB or the PSNI outside the District Council area. Many Independent Members expressed frustration that the local policing structures had the feel of a District Council committee rather than a liaison between community and police, while others complained that political parties did business with the police outside the PCSP structures.

This research was carried out across all eleven District Council areas. However, for reasons of ethics and confidentiality, our findings are presented at a general regional level, highlighting key themes rather than specific cases. At the same time, it is important to note that this both prevents us from highlighting individual good and bad practice and precludes us from dealing with important local variations.

3.1 Accountability and performance

The majority of participants believed that the focus of Policing Committees should be to *hold the PSNI to account* by measuring their effectiveness and performance. In general, however, 'accountability' was narrowly understood in terms of reporting by the PSNI on their stated commitments and plans. The accountability was by the PSNI and to the Committee:

“Accountability is the most important aspect of what we do. The public employ the police, and people expect them to deliver in line with public expectations.”

“Our job is to hold them to account. To make sure they are meeting their targets and doing what they said. First and foremost, that’s what we do.”

In a sense, this version of accountability automatically reconstitutes the ‘partnership’ into a board or a committee of ‘Council’ in which professional officers report to a volunteer oversight group. It is not a vehicle for the joint production of change in policing where actions are undertaken by the police and other agencies to a common agreed end, in which each group accounts to the others and all account for their part in delivering a shared goal.

At the same time, there was little consistency on how even police performance accountability was actually measured in practice, and varying degrees of confidence that the Policing Committees were fully capable of understanding the information being provided. Several participants noted that the statistics provided by PSNI often confused them and made it difficult to understand what was going on within the District:

“The Committee monitors police performance with great difficulty. Statistics are the key cornerstone of measurement but it can be hard to pin down what they actually mean.”

“The feedback from the PSNI about issues is usually very dry, it’s all very frustrating”.

“We run through the statistics on policing in the area and all of it comes from the commander. If there is something we think is not working, we can ask about it... What we do is hold them to account, but we focus on local detail. But do we look on rural crime as a whole? With so many members and so many interests it is hard. Because the Commander is there we look at their stats. We don’t ask big picture questions. We stick to the sheet.”

“We get the reports at last minute. People may not have read it. It does not do it justice.”

“There are issues being raised with the police and I don’t think that the police are responding. We were promised that the police would keep members informed. I don’t think there is any holding to account.”

“To be honest I think we don’t really use the statistics. It is hard to make sense of them. From day zero there were questions asked about the stats but they still present the figures... Our key role is to hold the police accountable. Now the issue

seems to be getting the community plan organized. The role of the PCSP and the Policing Committee is unclear to me now.”

“Maybe we don’t prepare for it. In the DPP days the policing people had access to the Police Statisticians and they could spew out questions based on a on overview. But that stopped.”

“The aim of the Policing Committee is to hold the police accountable but that does not happen. I get the feeling people are loath to step into the local statistics. Our partnership is too safe. We are used to talking about these themes and it may not get the scrutiny. It is also not the only meeting where the police come to talk about their performance. There are other meetings in the community – tension monitoring – where more or less the same info comes through.”

“I think our key role is to hold the police accountable. But now the issue seems to be getting the community plan organized. The role of the PCSP and the Policing Committee is unclear to me now.”

While ‘holding the police accountable’ was the predominant understanding of the role of Policing Committees, there were others that held a wider view focussed on improving people’s lives by actively participating in the wider policing process. They did not believe that monitoring performance charts and checking commitments was the central part of their function. Interestingly, a small number felt this was down to the lack of training for new members (which was relevant to them):

“We are more focused on promoting community safety and crime prevention than on monitoring police performance...maybe that’s due to the absence of any detailed training by the NIPB...all that new members got was an invitation from the Board to an evening event at which the Chief Constable made a nice speech and thanked them for their work.”

“We have had tensions around ‘holding the statutory agencies to account’ and that was challenged back. One of the big issues is understanding the breadth and depth of work that is going on outside your own areas. I think originally the PCSPs thought they could fix it. But that wasn’t it. It was about dialogue. There isn’t anything like it.”

“The PCSP is different areas pushing their own things. We do not think prioritizing the whole area. We have been bogged down by our parochialism. We tackle our area and we parcel up the resources and we don’t look at the Council as a whole.”

The mixed views on 'accountability' highlight a larger issue: members were unsure of their role and function and were therefore unclear about their own contribution and accountability within the wider policing context.

3.2 Information-sharing

Information-sharing is a crucial element of PCSPs and Policing Committees. Discussions on the flow of information focused on the nature of the relationship between the committee and the PSNI, and the impact of information on operational policing and on sharing information between different parties. For example, one member indicated that:

"I think we definitely bring intelligence to the police about what is happening on the ground that they would not otherwise have."

"A good thing is the move towards Support Hubs and Concern Hubs but if the confidentiality issues are not managed. It could be great or terrible depending on the confidentiality."

However, other participants suggested that the PCSP and not the Policing Committee was the most productive environment for cultivating relationships and sharing and receiving information:

"What I get out of it is contacts, the people around the table, which helps me, engage better in the local community as a member of the PCSP."

"We are given figures, very important figures. My problem is that we bring our own issues and get lost in that. I think the stats are shelved after the Policing Committee, but not used at the PCSP. I think it should be the central theme of our work."

"We very rarely sit in an empty room. We are always sharing information through our anti-social behaviour survey findings; consultations on neighbourhood watch or themed public meetings"

It was also noted that certain committees had a number of thematic groups which provided focused information on specific issues i.e. tension monitoring, anti-social behaviour, young people, race. These forums provided venues for sharing information and allowing people to make quick decisions:

"We have a plan that is flexible enough to allow us to respond to things as they emerge. We have several themed working groups and if they decide that something

needs done then they can make decisions prior to the next formal meeting. That's the value of having a PCSP – taking the information that's brought to our attention and doing something about it."

A number of members from multiple districts also talked positively about the commitment of police officers and how a lot of information-sharing took place away from the formal procedures of the committee meeting:

"The police are committed; they will stay for an hour after the meeting has ended to talk about any concerns we want to raise informally."

"We have a very good relationship with the District Commander and with the staff of the PCSP. The Commander takes time and he speaks to the people in the area."

This idea that relationships emerged outside of the formal setting will be explored in further detail below, but provides further evidence that the format and structure of the Committees was not supportive of collaborative working and information sharing.

3.3 Policing Plans

It was evident from the discussions that Committees and the PSNI employed various approaches to developing the local Policing Plan, depending on the district. Several participants talked about comprehensive and detailed levels of engagement between the police and Committee, while others suggested the plan was a fait accompli with limited or no contributions coming from members:

"I think we had a half-day to consider it...someone presented statistics, we had a chat and then we signed it off."

"The PCSP Managers meet with the Commanders and they tie up the plan. But is that not meant to be the way it is. The Committee is supposed to be making the decisions. We should be seeing more that they do."

"The PCSP plan is largely developed by staff. Our plan is trial and error. We can say some things about what we don't like."

"The District Commander brings a draft plan to us...that's probably the right way to do it, it's their plan after all."

“We get the draft too late before the meeting at which it is to be discussed, and it is made clear that we only have that one chance to have a say as we are told ‘it has to be signed off this week’.”

“We get a copy of the Policing Plan sent to us by email and then are asked to make comments – that’s it.”

“In the past a full day facilitated workshop was held. More recently a draft plan was discussed over a series of meetings.”

“We engage with the Policing Plan at the beginning of each new Policing Plan to try to set priorities. Throughout the lifespan of the Policing Plan we just do the updates. The PSNI have always said that this is a policing document, it is not a shared document. The local Policing Plan feeds into the regional plan and we don’t feed into it.”

Other participants went into more detail and talked about the processes surrounding the development of the plan:

“We held a planning day and evening workshop to draw up the plan, which allowed for discussions, but the plan still looked like last years, just updated rather than something new.”

“There are times in which we have relied on our external consultant to help us drill down into the plan. I don’t think we would ever have got there without facilitation. All those things have strengthened the partnership. We got our input into the Policing Plan. The Commander took information in and he consulted with us. I think there was a lot of work done to sort out the local issues.”

Policing Committee Members felt only distant connection to the NI Policing Plan and there was very little evidence of strong connections between the work of the committees and the efforts of the NIPB:

“What’s in the NI Policing Plan is not really a concern to me, our input into the local plan reflects local issues, and it’s the District Commander’s job to ensure that their plan reflects the NI plan.”

“Nobody here talks about the wider Policing Board Policing Plan, or provide any effort on their part to ensure that the local Policing Plan joins up with or reflects that plan.”

“We have had no real contact with the Policing Plan. This year it was a complete fiasco.”

Finally, there were a small number of participants who highlighted the relationship between their plan and that of the NIPB. They noted that they were guided by the previous year’s work and used similar templates on an annual basis:

“Our plan does reflect the overall Policing Plan, although last year we had our completed before the NI Policing Plan was finalised, so we had to delay publishing our until it was out there.”

“I don’t get a sense from the PCSP that we would see the Policing Committee as a way to influence the Policing Board. I don’t think that fault lies at our level. This has not been done from either side. We don’t have much contact with the Board. Recently they have introduced the Joint Committee and that has given us some kind of formal contact.”

“The Policing Board is too remote from us...We should be picking up the stuff that they are picking up. They do their own thing. In the last twelve months we have been asked to report twice. We never get stuff fed down or out. The questions don’t go up or down. I don’t think we have ever sent a question.”

“There is a real disconnect between the NIPB and the Policing Committees. There was meant to be a reporting mechanism. They would have come down and asked ‘is there anything we can do?’ The managers liaise, but we don’t. The only way we know what the NIPB are doing are when it is on the news.”

“A bugbear of mind is the relationship with the Policing Board. I have felt that we are just a tick box for them. There is an attitude of ‘if it works it works and if not we can get rid of it’. I don’t think they think to invest in the PCSPs. The PCSP is much more embedded in the Council. The Councillors attend. We meet in their buildings; the staff are Council staff. The Policing Board never darken our door. If a DoJ person comes to a PCSP meeting and does not open their mouth, I think it is a waste of public money. You feel like they are noting things not there to contribute.”

The general tone of the discussions suggested that members were primarily focused on local and even neighbourhood issues and challenges, and that attempts to link their work with the regional processes was were sporadic and inconsistent.

3.4 Public Confidence

There were a number of interesting discussions around the topic of public confidence in local policing, which inevitably fell along two lines – the role of the Committee was to promote policing to improve relationships and therefore increase confidence, or the police were responsible for building confidence and the Committee were there to monitor the PSNI:

“One of the things we fall down on is getting the information out there about what the police are doing, and then getting views back in response to that so we can build confidence in the police.”

“The police give us the information to pass on to the community. I do not think the community give us the information back. We seem to be doing peace making between the different areas.”

“The Committee holds consultation events at major public engagements to gather feedback on local policing.”

“To build the confidence with the PCSP you have to be dealing with all the local issues. You have to have the common touch, rather than just being strategic. If they want us to be strategic they need to allow us to represent the community too.”

Most members of Policing Committees were clear that surveys provided only a limited understanding of what confidence levels were like in the community. All of the members had experience of their Committees commissioning surveys but did not feel that they assisted their decision-making processes around confidence issues:

“Surveys are not the answer, especially in some communities. People simply do not answer and that is an issue, as we don’t get a true picture of what’s going on.”

In a number of cases the ending of systematic neighbourhood policing had become a major bone of contention with the police:

“Confidence in the policing has nose-dived since they got rid of neighbourhood policing. I used to have loads of names and could ring. Now I don’t know myself any more. That restructuring has upset the trust and confidence. In Carrick it is really serious. Even though we were told our station would never close, it has knocked confidence.”

A number of members were keen to promote their work and openly talked about their attempts to build confidence through positive engagements in the community. This was

viewed as a key component of their role and integral to supporting police-community relationships:

“We do outreach work in local schools, community groups and churches...farm safety initiatives and trailer markings...motorbike safety initiatives, engagements with migrant families, and pop-ups in shopping centres”

“It is also not the only meeting where the police come to talk about their performance. There are other meetings where in the community – tension monitoring– where more or less the same info comes through.”

“In every DEA there is a quarterly meeting. Members go to the DEA meetings. Independents go to all of them. Elected Members tend to go in their own areas.”

One member also talked about how they asked the police to address situations (where possible) in a particular manner to support their own promotional attempts to build confidence in local police:

“We have asked the police that in addition to responding to situations that they should take the opportunity to talk to people on the ground, informally, to make their presence known and to ask questions.”

Obviously, there were others who were less interested in talking about public confidence and keen to stress that this was solely the duty of the PSNI:

“Building public confidence in policing is the job of the PSNI, not that of the PCSP or its Policing Committee.”

The lack of consensus from members around both measuring confidence and whether they have a role in enhancing it, highlighted the overall sense of confusion about expectations of Policing Committee Members in relation to community confidence in the PSNI.

3.5 Partnerships

It was clear from the outset that the members realised the importance of relationships and the need to cultivate meaningful partnerships with a range of service providers. Nonetheless, Policing Committees are often most easily distinguished from PCSPs because other agencies withdraw or do not attend the Policing Committee. As a result, the partnership model of the PCSP becomes a bilateral accountability model on the Policing Committees:

“Other Statutory agencies don’t stay for the Policing Committee meeting. It may be because it is covered by the PCSP meeting. They come to the partnership– Health, Probation, Youth Justice Agency, Fire Service. It is optional for them to stay on for the Policing Committee and they don’t. The agenda on Policing Committee is handed over to the police. The commander would present a more detailed statistical breakdown of what is happening. Specific questions are asked around specific policing issues. There is also a block of money for enhancing confidence in policing which is also considered by the Committee... Area Commanders report on policing against the action plan. That is all there is to it. There has always been a slight question about why we have this when we have our original meeting. Within the legislation a Policing Committee is a requirement. The interpretation was that there was a need for a separate meeting.”

“We have a good relationship with the NIHE, the Youth Justice Agency will take on actions arising from the sub groups; the Fire and Rescue Service are very proactive, and the Probation Board bring a huge range of experience.”

“DPPs and CSPs will never sit well together. Because they have very different functions. We have brought the Policing Committee into the body of the PCSP. That was much better. It was game changing for the PCSP. And it involves the stats who are brilliant.”

Members were nonetheless keen to stress how important collaborative working and positive relationships with a range of stakeholders was key for the successful delivery of policing in their local areas. Once again, however, no clear distinction was drawn between the Policing Committees and the PCSPs:

“What matters most to me is how I can work with the police in my local area and help them to make it safer. Maybe that’s not what the PCSP is intended for, but that’s what works best for me.”

“It seems very positive...the commander will regularly call the chair to brief them on incidents before they appear in the media.”

In terms of relationships with the police, several members noted that it was very much personality driven and that found it easier to develop a partnership with some officers compared to others. Some PCSPs complained that the PSNI think it is their job to teach the PCSP about policing but that the community is not seen as a teacher even for short-term-commanders:

“It depends who is at our meetings (from the PSNI), when it’s good, it’s very good, but most of the time it’s negligible.”

“I felt that the former Commander was instrumental in bringing people together and there were some talks around things like paramilitarism which were really serious. And now it has gone. The last guy went over and above and he was very interested in the new ideas in policing. He understood partnership and he could do it. “

A recurring theme centred on the high turnover of police staff and how this often hindered the development of positive partnerships between members and the organisation. Although there was recognition that officers had to move on, there was still frustration at the loss of productive partnerships:

“It has been difficult to build a relationship with the PSNI as they continually change and can often mean that previous commitments are not kept.”

“Changing personnel is a real issue. Police change their personnel all the time. We have had 3 DCU commanders in 4 years. And yet they are the only person who comes to our meetings.”

“I am exhausted with making relations with the police...They change the people, the districts and the jobs. It is horrendous. We lost two senior police at once. You would not do that in business. There has to be continuity. The stats don’t change at the same rate. They seem to try to keep consistency.”

“The PSNI suit themselves. We are told they stay but then they are moved. It is how the value partnership, but they don’t stay. This habit permeates right through the ranks. The moving people is really serious in things like interaction with young people. It takes the police officer to take a name before they can name. It is not just disruptive for the PCSP; it is disruptive for the community. Confidence has to do consistency. There are also serious issues. It is overnight, and instant. They just get moved. It is a real problem.”

“We work with police in a lot of contexts. If I had a frustration it is that my experience is that you develop a good rapport in the senior police person and then they go and get promotion and all the good work that has been done starts from scratch. That is the biggest undermining of the PCSP process. You have to start a whole process of confidence building and that is a frustration. If you get a year out of them, you are lucky. I have a bit of police fatigue at the moment”

3.6 Internal Dynamics of the Committee

The discussions about the internal workings of the Policing Committee were almost entirely conflated with participant's views of the PCSP. In most cases no significant differences were made between the two.

Initial conversations focused on Designated Members from statutory partners at PCSPs and their involvement in the meetings, and it was apparent that members (depending on their district) had varying experience of working with them. One participant noted:

“For the wider PCSP meeting their attendance is reasonably good, but I am not sure how much they bring to the table. I know why they are there, but I am not sure we utilise them as effectively as we should. Sometimes it feels like they are [there] because their organisations have to be, and they are the ones who drew the short straw.”

Others were more frustrated with the contributions (or lack of them) from the Designated Members:

“I could generally tell you what they are going to say at each meeting before they say it.”

While others had a degree of sympathy for these Members (Designated) as they felt the meetings were structured in such a way that the focus was constantly on the PSNI:

“I think that having the Policing Committee at the end of the PCSP allows designated partners to leave, and I understand why they don't stay – they feel attending the PCSP is pointless, so why would they attend the Policing Committee as well.”

It was also evident that relationships between Independent and Elected Members varied, depending on the areas. For the most part the relationships seemed positive and professional, although, some noted there were occasions when Elected Members appeared to 'pull rank':

“Sometimes some of the councillor's demand to know why a particular project is not in their area rather than working together to make sure we are putting resources where they are shown to be needed.”

“There is a huge difference between the Independents and the Councillors. We as Independents have to put ourselves forward in a different way.”

“As an Independent Member, it is up to me to give 100% of this. I need to be engaging with my community groups. Independent Members are more focused on it. The Policing Committee is so important to us because Elected Members can’t be at everything.”

“In every DEA there is a quarterly meeting. Members go to DEA meetings. But Independents go to all of them. Elected Members tend to go in their own areas.”

Other discussions focused on the content of the meetings and again there was inconsistencies in how some members viewed the format and ability to influence the agenda. For some, their meetings were characterised by no strategic direction and a tendency to randomly introduce topics to fill voids in the agenda:

“We receive the agenda for the meetings and discover that we are going to receive a briefing on a particular aspect of policing, but have never been asked if we want that. Sometimes it feels like things are being put on the agenda to fill the time, rather than due to any strategic reason.”

Finally, there was mixed views from participants about how they felt their Committee used the media to promote their agenda. Several talked openly about how they used Facebook and other media platforms to promote events and particular police initiatives. However, others felt that their Committees were reluctant to embrace the media:

“I think the PCSP in general is too wary of media and social media, as a result we miss opportunities to promote our work and the build public confidence through successful policing.”

Overall there was real regional variation in expectations of Policing Committees. There was no formal consistency across the Committees in terms of conduct of business or engaging with stakeholders. Unsurprisingly, respondents held mixed views on the operational workings of their Policing Committees. However, it did not appear that there was any formal clarity of expectation of Committees in relation to their effectiveness and most members did not appear to expect to account for their activity to any third party or external authority.

3.7 Reporting

Most members acknowledged that they received multiple reports, especially statistical updates. This enabled members to have some understanding of the complexities surrounding policing in their local area. But there was no clear consensus on whether statistical dashboards were a useful tool for members to identify core issues, with some

preferring a more direct identification of local priorities through community members. Above all, many members appeared to feel that statistics always meant that Commanders always had a better grip of priorities than they did. As members were not equipped to analyse statistical data at the expected level, monitoring police performance by statistical data meant that accountability was seen as amateurs interfering in police culture, rather than police working to address community priorities:

“It can be hard to ascertain what is positive and what’s not (from all of the statistics)...therefore it is easier in some ways to judge on the basis of what we hear on the ground.”

“We need to be sure we know how data is collated. We had an example recently where animals wandering on the road were recorded as anti-social behaviour.”

“Maybe we are not together on what we want to ask the Commander. The Committee meetings are like a presentation and it is very hard to ask questions. I think they hope you are forgetting about things. Apart from the figures you need to have something tangible to work on and the statistics hide issues sometimes, they don’t rise them.”

“While the police report to the PCSP is fairly good, we have to work with the statistics we are given, and some of them don’t really mean anything, especially clearance rates, which can mean a range of outcomes, and not actual success.”

Furthermore, some participants indicated a tension between the time needed to go through statistical reports and the loss of time on ‘delving into significant issues’. The potential here, is that the need to ensure statistic accountability for performance runs counter to the ability of the Policing Committees to shape policing priorities and practice:

“We don’t delve into things. The Commander stands up and tells us what he thinks and he speaks for ages and that is the agenda... I think throwing statistics about is a problem. I do think our Commander takes time to break them down and they are now the issues. But the question is what we do with those issues?”

Other discussions focused on the types of data shared by the PSNI, with some questioning its relevance:

“It’s my impression that the PSNI data presented is more about what PSNI HQ wants rather than what’s useful for the Policing Committee...also the police are more defensive about what they will share than used to be the case in the days of the old District Policing Partnerships.”

It was also noted that there are cases where members gather data to compliment that of the PSNI, often through community safety forums, neighbourhood watch schemes and community committees:

“We operate a community and police liaison committee in this area and they are very community focused and these bring forward a lot of information to the Policing Committee.”

Finally, there were a small number of members that felt the manager had a very significant role in terms of how the agenda was shaped and what information was included and issues excluded:

“It just feels like the PCSP manager sees their accountability to the Council, rather than to the PCSP.”

“There are people with a lot of community experience but they do not seem to see what is NOT being reported. If the NIPB asked us things we would get better and we would be part of reporting actual performance particularly in relation to things like confidence.”

Overall members spoke positively about managers but there was a consensus that the success of a committee was dependent on having a pro-active, thoughtful and strategic manager that could support members and ensure all stakeholders contributed.

3.8 Successes and Challenges

Policing Committee/PCSP members talked extensively about the successes and challenges of working within a Policing Committee, with similar responses emerging regardless of the geographical area. Several talked about the need to continually raise the profile of the Policing Committee, with social media proving particularly successful:

“Facebook has helped raise the profile of the PCSP and things that the police and the committee are doing.”

It was also stated that thematic meetings had increased attendance at public meetings and proved productive in terms of raising issues and building new partnerships:

“Themed meetings are better attended, provide more focus and create more energy.”

The commitment and dedication of members was also recognised and seen as a crucial component in driving forward the policing and community safety agenda at a local level:

“The passion of all our members (colleagues) because it’s about more than the public meetings, it’s about what we are doing all the time.”

“Now I am starting to see good practice develop. Now we are starting to see good practice, although it has taken a while. Storming, forming, norming plays a part. I think we are more focused on making a difference. PCSP is a player who can bring something to the table.”

“I would have concern that there are judgements made outside the PCSPs. You have to be here to understand the potential and progress. I think PCSPs are a unique breed. There is no other meeting I attend that is anything like it.”

“I believe that the PCSP is a model that as communities we need to get good at. We need to learn to sit down in the mix and work things out. I think it is incumbent on everyone to nominate people into the PCSPs. If there is a real intention to make things work, there should be more care taken to select people to be involved. “

“Maybe the police don’t take us seriously. The PCSPs get their confidence from the Commander in the seat. They have to have a relationship of respect where there is permission to disagree. Where it works it is palpable.”

As for the challenges, the members noted that the greatest concern surrounded engaging with the wider public and increasing their knowledge about the role and function of the Policing Committee:

“Helping people understand what the PCSP is and does is a huge challenge – fewer than 5% of people probably know what we do.”

There also appeared to be issues with the format, style and tone of the Committee meetings, with many complaining that they were not helpful for stimulating critical debate around policing issues:

“The meetings are too formal with the council room and microphones, not conducive to collaborative working.”

Financial issues were also discussed with members, noting the difficulties in strategic planning and developing collaborative programmes with stakeholders, as they were unsure of financial resources:

“One-year budgets make it difficult to plan strategically and effectively.”

Finally, the continued issues emanating from the security situation were discussed with members talking passionately about the personal risks attached to working with the PSNI in some communities:

“Some people fear that if they engage with the PCSP then they will end up photographed in the paper standing alongside a police officer, and they are afraid of that.”

“One thing I am more disappointed about is that we used to go out and talk to people in the community. We used to go out and about. We don’t go out to groups.”

Overall, the sense from participants was that the structures needed ‘tweaked’ and made to work rather than structurally altered. Many believed that changes could be made to the structure of meetings and aligned to a clear sense of function and purpose.

3.9 Improvements to the process

As for moving the process forward, the participants put forward a series of suggestions which they felt could improve the impact of Policing Committees on policing and community safety issues.

a. More data and support analysis

Many members requested more support around interpreting police statistics and data. The data in the Policing Plan currently belongs to and measures the PSNI and is seldom seen as a vehicle measuring partnership performance including other agencies. Greater support would allow more constructive engagement and increase the quality of debate and interaction between members and the PSNI. Furthermore, several members thought that there should be a more focused analysis of the data down to DEA so they could better manage resources:

“In an ideal world, on top of the template report, I would like us to get a report on each DEA. That would allow us to better target our own resources, but would also allow us to talk to the police about their prioritisation.”

“We used a statistician to do some training for a previous PCSP, and it helped us to learn how to formulate questions.”

b. Awareness Raising

There was a consensus that more needed to be done by the NIPB to raise awareness about the role and function of Policing Committees. It was also suggested that Members (including Designates) needed to participate in an awareness training session so that everyone knew what was expected and how collaborative working could improve local areas:

“People don’t know what the PCSP does never mind the Policing Committee...we should have big badges to say who we are.”

“Members and designated partners don’t really understand what their role is, why they are there, what they can and cannot do. Perhaps if everyone understood better they would be more realistic, and therefore less frustrated.”

c. Regional learning and co-operation

A small number of members indicated that there should be a closer bond with other Policing Committees so that experiences (positive and negative) could be shared and explored:

“If we shared information across the different Policing Committee’s then we could learn more about what has worked and what hasn’t and why.

“It would be good if PCSPs could identify issues that are common between their areas, and maybe pool resources to run joint initiatives, that way we get more bang for our buck”.

d. Support Independent Members

It was felt that Independent Members should receive more support from the NIPB and that alterations should be made around how many meetings people could attend and roles and responsibilities of the vice chair:

“They should lift the restrictions on the number of meetings we can attend, and create a bigger role for the vice-chair, as that would promote the role of independents.”

“Why don’t they allow us the use the surplus of days that have been allocated to other members but have not been used...we could easily take their allocation”

“The NIPB has no problem with an independent chair, so why shouldn’t that be the case with us”

3.10 Summary

Members of the Policing Committees were keen to stress how much they believed the Committees could positively influence and shape local policing. However, the emphasis was on the sense of opportunity, and not necessarily on current experiences. The majority fundamentally believed in the principles and rationale for local mechanisms of advocacy and accountability but did not believe that they had delivered to their full potential. As one participant indicated:

“I think we all understand the theory but the practice is failing”.

There was a significant frustration among members around clarity of purpose. This affected the structure, content, participation and outcomes of Policing Committees, with blame placed variously on bureaucracy, lack of commitment from Designated Members and approaches taken by the PSNI to being challenged. The majority of participants stressed the importance and role of the ‘manager’ and suggested that more flexibility around the agenda setting with a greater emphasis on problem solving might improve the quality and effectiveness of Policing Committees.

4. PSNI findings

Interviews were undertaken with the eleven senior PSNI officers responsible for policing across the eleven policing districts. The conversations focused on:

- the nature of the relationships between the PSNI and their respective Policing Committees;
- the challenges and successes of their collaboration and partnerships; and
- areas of potential improvement.

4.1 Accountability

Senior officers believe that the Policing Committee's viewed their primary function as holding the PSNI to account and ensuring that they were fulfilling their obligations, and yet many were sceptical of the ability of Committees to do this thoroughly. All officers reiterated that the primary focus of Policing Committees was on police reporting to members, understood as 'accountability', and only rarely on 'advocacy' or 'partnership' or on members and other partners reporting on their actions to the police.

"They have the figures in advance. I try to highlight key issues and I find that more useful. The monitoring against plan takes place. To be honest it is easy. My figures are good. We have a very good performing difference. But all the key meetings are fringe. I explain the story behind the data. I have drafted every local Policing Plan around qualitative more than quantitative targets. I want to talk about how we are doing our business and the difference we are making."

"To be honest I find the accountability too easy. Under the DPPs it was much better. We have now agreed a PSNI wide reporting template. We have swung between numbers and the qualitative narrative. The PSNI and the Board agreed that corporately, without consultation, which annoyed me. The report is more bureaucratic but only happens four times a year and that is not often enough to pick up trends."

"In every meeting it is the police that talk the most. It is not a two-way street. I have a strategic plan for [one part of the Borough]. So every public meeting I mention that. But there are certain politicians who rely on the hard-line vote. But they won't vote for me. It impacts on their outlook. It is grandstanding for the public outside. I am speaking in public. I give every political party a meeting a month, if they want. Our performance against the Policing Plan was not good. I reported that, and yet there was no comeback. There is a lack of consistency in terms of what they are

doing. I am happy to be accountable although I don't want ripped apart. But indifference is another problem."

"Apart from the Council there is very little advocacy and very little partnership. They are a strong lobby group and they should be using that power to make the other statutory agencies more honest. I am happy to be held to account. But I don't see them becoming the advocates of the police in the community. I get more from the parties. They are neither fish nor fowl. They are too formal for informal information, people don't speak, and not professional enough for partnership."

It was suggested that there did not appear to be a similar approach taken by Committees to their public and private engagement with the PSNI. As one participant noted:

"After talking to colleagues from other districts there does appear to be more of an accountability focus here...it can be quite rough a times. Sometimes I can be blindsided on an issue, which doesn't seem to be in line with the code of conduct."

Our discussions revealed that officers felt the members of the Committees were unsure of the concept of 'accountability' and viewed in an overly simplistic one-dimensional context, where the PSNI has all of the responsibility, resource and answers. This led to a circular process, whereby the police dominated the meetings yet felt that they were characterised by a narrow concept of 'accountability' whereas the members felt that the police gave detailed statistical reports but remained unaccountable for policing.

There was also frustration among officers that some members did not appear to be well informed, lacking basic knowledge and understanding about policing in the local area. This was compounded by the fact that many of the members appeared to not read the papers and reports provided by the senior officer:

"I introduce the report, and then open myself up to questions, but I am lucky if there are even one or two questions. It is exceptionally formal. I am not even convinced that several of the members have even read the report."

"I am never asked about police misconduct. The only time it comes to fore is if it comes to the newspapers. But I should be accountable for my officers when they perform badly."

"The PCSP do not understand the word strategic. They want instant answers to local needs. They want a reaction to a problem that has landed with them. They listen to the problems then they bring them to me. But they don't articulate the answer themselves. It would have been much better if they could have been the advocate."

The officers talked continuously about the importance of being held to account and the relationship between accountability, public confidence and effectiveness. In general, there was a sentiment across the districts that this process could be more productive; less focused purely on the PSNI, and involves a more proactive approach from Policing Committee Members. As a consequence, some officers had introduced individual changes in their own districts, including close working with PCSP managers and private meetings with Council and Elected Members:

“Locally I email a 24 hr. summary on every weekday to PCSP Members with the aim so that they can see some of the patterns. They also get a weekend report. I will also provide real-time briefings on local critical incidents. They get breaking news on a group text and I am relying on them not to run to the media. We are not telling them things, which are operationally, or sensitive... I think that works fairly well. The PCSP gets updates every day. They are still frustrated by some of the quality of information, but they get a sense of the core volume crime. Superimposed over that a quarterly report squeezed in as an agenda item is not going to make a difference.”

“We now have a text network and the PCSP Manager has found a web-based project to send texts to them. But then at a key moment in time a duty sergeant doesn’t send it. My undertaking is to text them in advance if I can. My frustration with my inspectors and sergeants is that they don’t understand the importance of it. That is my job.”

4.2 Relationships

All of the officers talked about their positive working relationships with managers and members of the Policing Committees. Indeed, some felt that the broader informal partnerships, although less developed had delivered more than accountability:

“I am not under real pressure about my deployment of officers. They are too easy on us. If we accept that part of this is about accountability, then that bit is working less well than the partnership element. “

Many officers provided examples of how their engagement with Independent and Political Members had resolved challenging issues and generally improved policing in local areas. However, much of this appeared to be conducted on an informal and bilateral basis outside the Policing Committee and even the PCSP.

In terms of the Policing Committee itself, the majority of officers maintained the view that the format and process was not the most conducive for building positive and collaborative working partnerships:

“I don’t see them becoming the advocates of the police in the community. I get more from the parties. The Committees are neither fish nor fowl. They are too formal for informal information, people don’t speak, and not professional enough for partnership.”

In general, Policing Committees are distinguished from the wider PCSP because other statutory agencies are not present on the Policing Committee. There is a wider sense that the Council is the dominant agency on the management side of PCSPs and the Police are ‘held to account’, whereas other agencies attend the PCSP because it is a requirement. There was a lot of frustration with the other agencies that attend (and those that don’t) as officers believe that many of the challenges and problems presented to the PSNI require a multi-agency response, yet the PSNI are the only ‘partner’ held to account:

“It is structured and run like a Council meeting. In my previous Council area, issues would come up in main council that could be addressed by the elected reps sitting on the PCSP, yet I was still getting questions for Council. The PCSP reports to Council but when the Council asks questions about policing it comes back to me, even though the members know. The other partner agencies just attend meetings. They come because they have to. I work well with the agencies but they don’t see the PCSP as important. Every Council in NI sees the PCSP as a Council sub-committee.”

“The NIHE would tend to be the most collaborative, as they are involved along with the PSNI in other forums especially around antisocial behaviour...the other agencies tend to be less collaborative, and work on their own initiatives.”

“Whereas the other services come in, they don’t get the same kind of scrutiny as we do.”

“Designated partners could do more.”

There was recognition that the legislation (or lack of it) meant the PSNI inevitably became the focus of all policing issues, yet the reality for officers was that they alone could not address the concerns of members. The current format made it more difficult to forge working relationships with Designated Members, as they were not held to the same levels of accountability as the police were.

4.3 Local Policing Plans and NIPB plans

The conversations around the local and regional Policing Plans generated mixed responses from officers. There does not appear to be a consistent process across all Districts for developing and monitoring local plans. It was evident that some Committees and PSNI work collaboratively within a structured process to produce comprehensive local Policing Plans, while others have limited or no process around the formulation of such plans. Other officers talked about their frustration around the process to develop a local Policing Plan, which was often characterised by a lack of energy, commitment and enthusiasm from members:

“To be honest, it doesn’t tend to change much from year to year – road safety, domestic violence, tackling vulnerability etc.”

“A wee focus group came in to see my local Policing Plan. The bits they put in are about local issues. It is very hard to put 5-10 kids drinking in a park into the local Policing Plan. But that is what they want in.”

“There seems to be a lack of understanding of what the local Policing Plan is for – that it’s not meant to cover everything, and that we are supposed to prioritise. So in terms of the Policing Committee’s input, it is certainly not a labour intensive process that requires a lot of negotiation.”

“Our Area Plan is based on a very good listening and information gathering process and a pivotal competence in the PCSP manager. She is not just there to organized meetings. She does all the business in between. She knows what a whole year looks like.”

“We ask in Oct/Nov and kick it off with a performance meeting. Internally we are told it is your plan not theirs but I don’t quite know what that means. A month or two later they then start thinking about their plans and they start filling each other’s gaps. It makes it much more meaningful and you can compare and contrast.”

Several officers also noted that there was a lack of co-ordination between the local and regional Policing Plans. They felt that the members were unsure how their work with the police at district level would support the more regional policing agenda. Overall, participants felt that the committees were focused on local and micro issues and not concerned about the NI Policing Board and their priorities:

“Waterside Tower’s relationship only exists with Brooklyn. That is very frustrating. It is hierarchical and when you go to their events they are patronizing about local issues. The PCSPs have a pseudo relationship with the DOJ around funding but it is less patronizing. The Department is more supportive than the Board with the PCSPs. It’s a corporate culture issue and they are not down and dirty.”

“It is more aligned with the Community Planning process rather than the Policing Board.”

“The Board has no connection. It is all with the Council. The Board will run events and tick boxes. I have had no sense that there is any connection. They will invite people to events. The Board has been turning up a bit more. Anthony has taken a huge interest in DOJ. But really knowing what is going on...I am not sure.”

“There is a guidance document on PCSPs in general, but not specifically on how to draw up a local Policing Plan.”

“The focus is primarily local and there is not much attention on how the work of the Committee fits with the NI Policing Plan.”

One officer captured his dilemma when he suggested that the Committee often follows the views of the police once they have factored in resources:

“In this area it tends to be more of a case of the police identifying what the priorities are and asking the PCSP if it agrees.”

The discussions highlighted disconnect between macro and micro policing and evidenced how the Committees often found it difficult to frame their issues beyond local neighbourhoods. The conversations also highlighted the lack of joined-up working between the committees and the NIPB in relation to measuring outcomes and providing synergy between the different Policing Plans.

4.4 Public confidence

According to the officers the Policing Committees were intended as an avenue through which they could engage with community stakeholders, elected representatives and statutory service providers to build public confidence in local policing and community safety initiatives. It was also recognised by the officers that the Policing Committees had both the potential to facilitate positive engagements with the wider community, and to also block potential opportunities for relationship building:

“What they say about us (the police) has the potential to do us good, but to also damage us.”

“They are the conduits for connecting into the voluntary sector. They go into that. The PCSP and the Council do that. There are more benefits than there are cons. The body of the PCSP are well-intentioned amateurs.”

It was evident from the responses that officers from across the various districts had very different relationships with their respective Policing Committees. Some found their Committees helpful and productive in terms of supporting the PSNI make relationships with individuals and organisations across the council area. However, there were others who felt their Committee was often silent on difficult local issues and not supportive in relation to ‘standing beside the police’:

“While the PCSP is out there on some key issues, there are others including legacy issues such as flags and bonfires, were very invisible.”

“I’m not aware of the Committee doing anything to encourage local people to engage in discussions about policing; it could be, but I am just not aware of it.”

“Lots of little things were done. The relationships with the PCSP have been key in creating confidence in here. I inherited all of it in a very enabling environment. The political parties were keen to make it work. They have a go at me occasionally. They can choose to be available and not available.”

“We have a huge network of Neighbourhood Watch co-ordinators and along with colleagues manage all those gatherings. We have over a 100 Neighbourhood Watch committees. We are migrating them towards a safeguarding role rather than curtain twitching. The co-ordinator can identify where the more vulnerable are and get others to help support. And helping them to understand all the support functions.”

Overall, the officers were not in a position to comment on what they thought the committees had achieved in terms of building local confidence in policing and there was no formal mechanism to identify this within the performance of the Policing Committee:

“I really don’t have much sense of what the Committee does to increase confidence. We report on the levels of confidence under the Service Plan, but there’s no discussion of what we report. I don’t get any feedback from them on the issue.”

The general consensus was that the Policing Committees were not working alongside the PSNI to build confidence in the policing institutions. There was frustration that this was a missed opportunity especially where the Committees had become overly 'reporting based', rather than problem solving. This resulted in a focus on procedures and statistics and less concern about building public confidence.

4.5 Culture of lawfulness

The overwhelming view from officers was that the Policing Committees were un-interested and disconnected from the Fresh Start proposals around paramilitarism and the disbanding paramilitaries panel recommendations on establishing a culture of lawfulness. We did not find examples where Policing Committees or PCSPs were problem-solving or working to deliver inter-agency solutions to this issue, in which there was close co-ordination and mutual accountability. As one officer noted:

"This is not an issue the Policing Committee has ever discussed."

"I have a local rule: I don't do legacy. I try to get somebody else but I don't use the time for it and they accept that."

Interestingly, one officer indicated surprise that their Committee had failed to register any interest in the topic:

"The Policing Committee does not reference counter-terrorism work in any of its plans, despite the fact that it is such a significant proportion of the police's work in the district."

"I would like to see them identifying issues and campaigning on them. Police are the solution. DCU commanders are expected to solve all the problems. We have officers in [one town] trying to keep criminals safe. That has a big impact on morale. Do I keep my officers safe in a small town where they are under threat from dissidents, or do I keep the loyalist feud under control?"

4.6 Perceptions of Policing Committees

Generally, officers believed PCSPs were a potential opportunity to improve the effectiveness of the PSNI, build public confidence in policing and improve the quality of life of local residents. However, in practice the Committees were not delivering fully, and risked being

seen as resource-intensive exercises that had limited benefit for improving operational policing. One recurring comment from officers surrounded the lack of knowledge and preparedness of members during the meetings:

“Increased effectiveness would look like members reading the reports before they come to the meetings. It can be very frustrating. We are there to be challenged; we want intelligent questioning.”

“Sometimes I get a sense that they do not really understand the figures presented to them...there does seem to be a need for more training.”

“I suppose this goes to the heart of what the Policing Committee does...and do they really understand what good performance looks like?”

“It is all very parochial: the old Councils sit together...They bring up small-scale local issues: any small things they jump on to make sure it gets in the minutes. It is not strategic. If I were to push my resources to [one town, the other town] would go mad. To be fair the Council worker try to be borough focused. The meetings are shared over the area. But all the Elected Members care about is their own areas.”

Discussions also noted that it seemed to be very much a one-way process, with the PSNI approaching meetings both prepared and ready to commit to programmes and initiatives, while the members were either dis-interested or focused on specific issues that related to their own constituency:

“I don’t get the impression that many members are very engaged at a strategic level. For the amount of effort we put into the policing report, I am not sure that they or we get a lot from the meeting; it certainly doesn’t drive our processes at all.”

It was also suggested that committee procedures were not always conducive to creating an atmosphere of problem-solving and opportunity-taking around improving the effectiveness of local policing:

“I am not saying the Policing Committee is unsupportive, but I don’t feel they are particularly active after the meeting or engaged. Furthermore, the meetings are very formal, with everything having to be formally proposed and seconded. It doesn’t feel like it is about actually doing business, beyond carrying out the administration element.”

“The biggest grumbling is ‘you didn’t tell us’. That is a frustration with my officers. Some of them don’t understand the reason to tell key people. UTV will stick a

microphone in his face and he has to say something. It is an internal issue with my sergeants and inspectors: how important PCSP Members are to community confidence. They are critical. Some of our people get it, but some don't. I can do 20 good things and then there is one incident that is a surprise or doesn't go to plan then that takes the attention."

A recurring theme was that officers wanted the committees to provide support and actively participate in building public confidence in the PSNI. However, the reality was one dominated by reports, statistics and PSNI constantly having to explain outcomes and performance targets.

"The meetings are too big...a massive square of people looking at me. I am not on their subcommittees. I would prefer a smaller well-informed group to have a conversation with. We need to bring in people of influence in their parties. At the moment they bring in people for development but I would like more senior people."

4.7 Successes and challenges

As the discussions neared completion officers were asked to consider what they felt were the successes and challenges surrounding their engagement with Policing Committees. The majority of officers felt that the onus of responsibility around issues pertaining to policing was theirs, when the reality was very different:

"Often the police are seen as having the solution, rather than other agencies having a solution...the big challenge is to get more people involved in more collaborative initiatives to transform communities."

Other officers talked about the challenges around getting Designated Members to play a more active role in policing discussions:

"Other statutory agencies sharing information around the table, and designated bodies actually doing business around the table."

"Other stats: it needs them to see it as 'their meeting'. Health, youth services, neighbourhood all those services."

It was also pointed out that the recent amalgamations of councils and redrawing of policing districts has affected the ability of members to think more strategically about policing

issues. Very often members are unable to shift the narrative away from their local areas, which has meant the PSNI focusing their attention in meetings to very local problems:

“If anything the merging of councils has seen members take a less collective approach and instead on very local personal issues...this is very frustrating.”

“But the Councillors want a the PCSPs to reflect the old Councils, as do the independents.”

A further challenge centred on the make-up of the committees and the formal of the meetings, with officers noting a difference in levels of knowledge between members:

“Independent Members appear less well informed about issues than Elected Members.”

“The style and tone of the meetings is too formal, too much like council business...they need to create an environment which people can provide solutions and not feel intimidated by the surroundings.”

As for the successes, the officers were quick to highlight the positive relationships (often personal) they had with members, while indicating that much of their business was conducted outside of the committee itself:

Good relationships with individual members, with members having no difficulty lifting the phone to raise issues

Several officers also drew attention to the support given by the PCSP (not the Policing Committee) around communicating changes to the local policing arrangements:

The PCSP (not the Policing Committee) has been effective in getting messages out to the local community, especially in relation to the changes in structures around community policing.

Overall the challenges outweighed the successes during the discussions. Although the emphasis was on how the committees were frustrating officers, there was recognition that the blue print and architecture to supporting community-police relationships was there in the form of PCSPs and Policing Committees.

4.8 Improvements to the process

The participants were asked to consider how the Policing Committees might better address their needs, and what changes would be necessary to improve the overall effectiveness of the committees from a PSNI perspective. It was suggested that:

a. Changes to procedures and reporting

A number of officers identified specific changes to accountability and procedure, which could improve the performance of Policing Committees:

“For a long time the first part it was the main PCSP run like a Council meeting and then we had the Policing Committee and by that stage they were tired. Fascinating how reliant ‘the Sinners’ are on their i-Pads. Somebody somewhere asks a question and somebody somewhere asks a further question, even if I have answered it. But now they have decided to put the Policing Committee first and they are fresh when they come to it. They have the figures in advance. I try to highlight key issues and I find that more useful.”

“The PCSP’s and the PSNI report separately at the moment. Those reports should be one. Let’s do joint reporting to the board. The PCSP has been writing its business plan in isolation from the Policing Plan. That is nonsensical. We have now merged the meeting and they are written in concert. They are not the same document but read together they are a much more coherent narrative of what is intended. But the Policing Plan should not be the format on which we report either.”

“The accountability meeting should be a stand-alone to improve the quality. It is two years since I did that. It is always tagged on to something else. The haste is almost obscene. But we need to pay attention. I want a question and answer kind of format. It put me under pressure more. Not everything is pre-scripted. Of course it is too parochial. We show them SATURN and LCOATE and that helps. And that is an effective briefing tool.”

“We should move the managers out of Council buildings and into police stations. One of the next things we are looking for is that the PCSP manager should have a line into the District Management Meeting. There is a clear purpose to it. It will give them an even more improved mechanism and could help more quickly. If we are serious about the partnership.”

b. Re-educate members on the function and role of a committee

Several officers were of the opinion that the NIPB should increase member's knowledge around the language, terms and phrases associated with policing. Furthermore, members should also be educated around how to ask questions, and more importantly how best to frame them, so they maximise their opportunity to receive information that can assist them in their role as part of the Policing Committee. As one officer noted:

"I have tried to explain the differences between detection and outcome, but I am not sure those explanations have landed...so I do have a concern that some of the reductions in crime and the outcomes we have achieved get lost in that discussion."

c. Community planning

A number of officers talked about the need to ensure that the PSNI, PCSP and community planning officers were working in partnership to ensure collaborative approaches surrounding policing and community safety were being developed. It was suggested:

"If we could tie in the work of the PCSP with the community planning system then things would improve. The community plan should link into the Policing Plan, and then tie into the overall NI Policing Plan...otherwise there is a risk that the three plans could all pull in different directions."

d. Increasing public participation

Although the officers recognised the challenges around encouraging greater public representation at meetings, they felt that an increase in public involvement would increase legitimacy, improve accountability and raise confidence at the local level. It was suggested that the committees could look at technology as a method of increasing participation:

"We are probably not being innovative enough in trying to involve people. We could try and live stream the meetings."

e. Developing coherent and measurable collective outcomes

To date the emphasis and focus on resolving issues usually sits with the PSNI as they are viewed as being responsible for policing issues. However, there was a sense that if the designated partners were more committed and that there was a change in the tone and procedures surrounding the meetings that there might be an opportunity to change how 'business is done'. As one officer indicated:

“I would like to see solutions being brought to the meeting, rather than just identifying issues, often the answers and the capacity lie within the community, rather than with the police.”

4.9 Summary

The discussions with the police highlighted some frustration with the current set-up of Policing Committees. This primarily concerned the format, flow of information and a sense that they were the only organisation being held to account. The fact that Designated Members were not under statutory responsibility to attend meetings meant there was limited opportunity to develop collective approaches to community safety and policing issues unless PCSPs and Policing Committees worked as a single unit. Where this did happen there was evidence of greater satisfaction at inter-agency working.

Police participants in this research believe that Committee members could do more in terms of building community support for policing and increasing confidence in the PSNI. To date, the emphasis from members was perceived by officers to be holding the police to account and not necessarily on supporting them to address public concerns on policing. However, there was also a sense from the police that mechanisms such as Policing Committees that were supposed to promote local accountability, collaborative working and engagement were necessary in terms of increasing police effectiveness and public confidence.

5. Observations and Recommendations

5.1 Formal relationships between PCSP and Policing Committee

There is no single or consistent approach to the relationship of Policing Committees to PCSPs. Indeed, Policing Committee meetings are structured differently in each Council. In some Councils the distinction between PCSP and Policing Committee has been set aside, and the PCSP meeting is a single agenda. Some Committees are scheduled before wider PCSP meetings, where they function as meetings ‘in advance’ of the PCSP, while some take place afterwards. Still others have evolved a practice of holding less regular but separate and distinct meetings of the Policing Committee held in various venues. There is a sense from some participants that this uncertainty is inefficient and ineffective and for others that separate Committees are at risk of repeating elements already covered within the wider PCSP meetings.

In many cases, members struggled to establish a consistent difference between the two. Two statements sum up a general theme underpinning the findings:

“It was a struggle at times to get members and District Commanders (DCs) to distinguish in their observations between the Policing Committee and the wider PCSP, suggesting that they don’t really see much difference”.

“On a number of occasions at the start of a focus group, Policing Committee Members asked the researcher what a Policing Committee was”.

Where they operate separately, the primary differences appear to be that:

- Membership of the Policing Committee is limited to the PSNI, the PCSP staff, the Political Members and the Independent Members;
- A focus on statistical reports from the police; and
- A culture of treating the Committees as limited ‘sub-committees’ of the PCSP, and therefore as sub-sub-committees of Local Councils.

Changes in Council structures have created new challenges for a number of PCSPs and Policing Committees. For some, the new Council arrangements have led to a combining of very different cultures and an increased sense of separateness and parochialism. For others, the complaint was that the PCSPs were now so big that they had no common frame of reference and no sense of shared identity. One PCSP had introduced DEA Forums as a way to engage more locally, while others used the DEA forums of Councils to engage with local interests.

Recommendation:

1. The Board should work with partners to ensure that there is a clear, consistent and shared understanding among all stakeholders, including PCSP members, PSNI Commanders, local government and the Department of Justice, of the role and purpose of Policing Committees and of their proper relationship to the PCSP. The Board should be satisfied that the specific tasks of the Policing Committee and its integral relationship with the PCSP are fully understood and operational in each area.
2. Following this, the Board should formally review and reissue guidelines setting out the expectations on Policing Committees and the PCSPs and DCPSPs in relation to developing and delivering the policing plan and establishing clear expectations in relation to performance, support, engagement and monitoring arrangements. The Board should also consider formal guidance on best practice on engagement and consultation with the public on policing issues.
3. The Board should consider whether there is potential to increase the role and prominence of independent members. This might include consulting with the DoJ on the potential for legislative change to allow independent members to be chairs and vice chairs of Policing committees.
4. The Board should have a programme of regular engagement with Policing Committees and Policing Committee members including a rolling plan to ensure that Policing Committees are updated on best practice and lessons learned at local level are shared with other Policing Committees.

5.2 Variations in the Culture of PCSPs/Policing Committees

The differences in formal culture were also reflected in considerable differences in the informal culture of PCSPs and Policing committees.

The approach of District Commanders appears crucial. It was clear from the interviews with District Commanders that their approaches differ significantly – perhaps most strikingly in the variety of ways in which Commander’s engage with the Policing Committee in the development of a local Policing Plan. In some instances, Committees were very collaborative, beginning with a meeting with a blank sheet, whereas elsewhere members spoke of having one chance to contribute.

It was clear from comments made by PCSP Members that their experience of District Commanders engagement with PCSPs can vary quite significantly. In many instances, the personal relationships with District Commanders and PCSP managers appeared strong and positive. Most spoke favourably of their current District Commanders in comparison to

previous District Commanders, which may suggest that over time District Commanders are becoming more effective at building positive relationships with their PCSPs. Where the District Commander was enthusiastic about the PCSP, the PCSPs were generally appreciative of the relationship. In a few cases, however, the relationship had elements of mistrust and even a degree of scepticism of the value of the PCSP system. All PCSPs emphasised that their criticisms of outcomes were not personal.

Policing Committee/PCSP Members struggle with the culture of staff turnover within the District Commands. There were different views on which police officers should attend the Policing Committee. While some District Commanders brought inspectors to the meeting others attended alone. Where only one officer attends, the PCSPs complained that this left them vulnerable to regular staff changes. It was suggested both that Police Commanders should be longer in post AND that more officers should attend to allow for continuity of relationship and knowledge.

There was also a variation in terms of the approach to monitoring performance. Thus a District Commander in one area expressed a wish that the Policing Committee would meet in advance to determine what questions they might ask, while in another area there is a powerful sub-committee that meets a week ahead of the Policing Committee to consider the District Commander's report and draw up questions for submission in advance of the formal meeting.

In practice the PSNI, PCSP staff and Elected Members have avenues outside the formal meetings for constant liaison. A number of District Commanders and Managers spoke of how the real business of the PCSP is done between officials and partners outside of the PCSP meeting. This is not the case for Independent Members, who were most likely to complain about confusion and ineffectiveness as people in meetings appeared to have been briefed about issues prior to Policing Committee meetings.

Similarly, the role of the PCSP Manager is critical to the effectiveness of the PCSP especially in co-ordination, information sharing and post meeting action. Some Commanders rely heavily on the PCSP Manager to 'manage' their committee. In others, the PCSP Manager is the crucial co-ordinator of local activity.

In general, PCSP Managers are held in high regard by their Committees. However, and partly as a result of PCSP managers and Elected Members operating within local Council structures, some members commented that Policing Committees have developed the atmosphere of Council committees. It was suggested that the introduction of community planning might further embed this development. This procedure is easily understood by Councillors, but tends to promote a culture of sporadic accountability rather than active partnership on live issues. The current environment appears also to contribute to

demoralisation among Independent Members, many of who joined to make an active difference to policing at local level rather than simply to hold to account.

PCSP Managers themselves have concerns at that members lack a clear understanding of their role as a PCSP/Policing Committee member. A number of members, District Commanders and managers spoke of the need for more training for members, both Elected and Independent. District Commanders sometimes appeared to know more about the intended function and operation of PCSPs than PCSP Members did. Generally, Elected Members appeared to play a more prominent role in formal monitoring of police performance, but were less interested in problem-solving or active partnership – suggesting that the training needs of elected reps and Independent Members may be different.

Recommendations

5. Currently, it appears that there is no clear consistency of understanding among either members (of the policing committee) or Police Commanders of the specific role of Policing Committees or of the way in which their functions relate to the wider purposes of the PCSPs. The Policing Board must ensure that each Policing Committee operates within a clear outcomes framework and understands its contribution to the outcomes of the PCSP. The role of Policing Committees in contributing to and delivering those aspects of the NI Policing Plan of local importance should be clear to all parties, and Policing Committees should be resourced to ensure that they participate fully in the development, monitoring and review of the Plan.
6. Many interviewees reported that the primary function of the Policing Committees was to ensure ‘accountability’ in policing. In many cases this appeared to mean formal statistical performance management of the local PSNI, with neither party satisfied with the outcome. The Policing Board should work closely with local Policing Committees to agree on appropriate and shared definitions of accountability and to design and implement processes that ensure that all parties are satisfied and that this duty is being satisfactorily performed. The Board should consider training for Policing Committees in support of this objective.
7. The role of the Policing Committees in advocating and communicating on behalf of the Police or of establishing and confirming confidence in local policing remains unclear. The Policing Board should work with their partners to ensure that there is a clear understanding of the respective roles of the Policing Committees and the PCSPs in communications and maintaining local confidence in policing.

8. The Policing Board should work with Policing Committees to ensure that each Policing Committee has a clear understanding of the respective roles and responsibilities of members, managers and police personnel in Policing Committees and PCSPs in delivering the agreed outcomes and tasks. In particular the responsibility of Policing Committees within PCSPs to contribute to policing-related problem-solving should be formally clarified. The role of other statutory agencies in delivering policing and how this relates to the specific function of Policing Committees where they are not members should be clarified with the participant agencies.
9. A programme of continuous training should be agreed on an annual basis for Policing Committee members and PSNI officers working with the Committees. This could include proposals for sharing best practice, developing a culture of problem solving, outcomes-based accountability and changing legal and technical expectations. The degree of dependence of Policing Committees on their Managers makes effective, continuous and co-ordinated training and support for both Committee and Manager critical, especially if the Managers are to account to the Committees for actions alongside the PSNI.
10. As relationships between the PSNI and Policing Committee Members are critical to the success of Policing Committees it is important that attention is paid to continuity of relationship with the District PSNI. Many of our respondents complained that the requirements of staff turnover in the PSNI were incompatible with community expectations of longer-term relationships with individual officers. In order to ensure that this issue is addressed, the Board should engage with the PSNI with a view to ensuring continuity of relationship and knowledge at local level. This might involve more than one officer attending the PCSP/Policing Committee meetings in order to ensure organisational continuity.

5.3 Role and Purpose of Policing Committees

Among members across Northern Ireland, there does not appear to be a shared understanding of the purpose or purposes of Policing Committees. The extent to which the Policing Committee is a single body with a shared strategic vision or a vehicle for the representation of local priorities remains unclear.

For some, their purpose is expressed as ‘holding the police to account for local actions’, for others as ‘a partnership in the delivery of policing at local level’. For some the priority was

seen as a question of information-sharing, for others it was a matter of setting strategic priorities and for still others it is an opportunity to press the police on specific local issues.

Among the most significant uncertainties were:

- The absence of a shared understanding of mutual or partner accountability;
- The absence of a clear understanding of strategic policing priorities;
- A focus on technical accountability rather than genuine understanding and mutual accountability.

The use of statistical information and performance ‘dashboards’ appears to have the effect of confusing some members, and making them feel that their specific issues are hidden behind data and addressed in general rather than addressed in practical action at local level. Some expressed the view that statistics allowed the police to ‘tick the box’ of giving accountable information, without the members feeling that they had understood anything. Some police commanders and managers on the other hand expressed the view that the Policing Committees were not sufficiently trained to carry out their responsibilities. Commanders regularly commented that the accountability aspects of PCSP and Committee meetings were too ‘easy.’

Many PCSP Members complained about both external and internal communications. Members in several PCSPs seemed to have very little awareness of whether or how their PC engages in “continuous consultation and engagement.” Currently, most members and Commanders believe that that the way in which PCSPs can and should shape policing in the District is not widely understood or appreciated. Almost all public debate around the delivery of policing centres on the performance of ‘the police’ rather than the delivery of ‘policing’ by the police and its partners.

In addition, several, especially Elected Members, complained that they often heard of local incidents first through the press and were not kept in the loop. A number of Commanders acknowledged that the culture of communication with key local partners had not always permeated the lower ranks of the PSNI. A number of Police Commanders indicated that they would like to see much greater opportunities for information sharing with PCSP Members and members of Policing Committees in particular.

Recommendations

11. There is a clear need to establish *in detail* what is meant by the term accountability in relation to Policing with the Community and for PCSPs and Policing Committees in particular. This could include, for example:

<p>For what should the police provide an account to Policing Committees?</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Overall performance to policing targets. • Policing elements of Community Plans. • Agreed local action priorities. • Specific requests from members for action.
<p>To whom and for what are PCSP and Policing Committee members accountable?</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • PCSPs are accountable to the local public for monitoring police performance against agreed targets in their area of authority, and for ensuring that confidence in local policing is maintained and monitored. • PCSPs are accountable to the public for ensuring that practical solutions and programmes to tackle all identified local policing issues have been agreed and action undertaken to address them by the relevant agency or community. • PCSPs are responsible for delivering all actions agreed under the local Community Planning Process. • Each PCSP Members should account to other members for those actions agreed at PCSP meetings. • PCSPs are accountable to the NIPB to ensure that local policing issues are being address through action by the PSNI and partners.
<p>What are the responsibilities of statutory partners in PCSPs and Policing Committees?</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • To identify, carry out and account for actions undertaken with other partners to achieve policing outcomes. • To contribute actively to problem-solving through partnership with other members of the PCSPs.
<p>To whom should Policing Committees report on performance?</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Local Councils. • Northern Ireland Policing Board.

12. The PSNI and PCSPs should consider how best to publicise Policing with the Community and Problem-Solving Policing in their Districts. Communications protocols between the PSNI and PCSP Members should be established at a regional level.

5.4 Relationship with the NI Policing Board

There appears to be no clear sense of the relationship of Policing Committees to the work of the Policing Board:

“I don’t get a sense from the PCSP that we would see the Policing Committee as a way to influence the Policing Board. I don’t think that fault lies at our level. This has not been done from either side. We don’t have much contact with the Board. Recently they have introduced the Joint Committee and that has given us some kind of formal contact. The most recent time that I can remember the issue of influencing the Policing Board was the issue of more Neighbourhood Policing...We report through documents.”

“There is no personal contact unless I have to ask what I have to ask. There is a new feature, in that Independent Members of the NIPB are coming to see us but that is new, and may in the long term make a difference. There is an MLA from this area who is on the NIPB and she never asks about us. We are not scrutinised with regard to our own effectiveness like we should be. Basically connectivity is poor.”

Recommendation

13. The Northern Ireland Policing Board should, as a matter of priority, develop a clear programme of regular and consistent engagement with PCSPs and Policing Committees. To ensure this, the Board should review the current level of direct contact with Policing Committees and ensure that they have a clear sense of the activity, priorities and performance of Policing with the Community in every District Council area in Northern Ireland.

5.5 Strategic and Operational Focus

For Elected Members in particular, but also for some Independents, there appears to be a tension between representing the views and concerns of people in their area of residence

(either DEAs or the local community in which they live), and promoting a District-wide strategy. A number made clear that their priority was raising issues of immediate concern to local supporters or stakeholders. In the context of new District Councils, a number of people remarked that members preferred to 'carve up' police resources to ensure that their part of the Borough got 'its' share' rather than focus resources on an issue which resulted in less being spent in 'their area'.

This creates potential tensions with others, including Police Commanders and representatives of other agencies, who do not prioritise locality but overall statistical performance or who argue for 'hotspot' policing. Members in several PCSPs seemed to have little awareness of whether or how their Policing Committee engages in "continuous consultation and engagement." Other members, and a number of Commanders, complained that Councillors treated both staff and Independent Members as if they were at a Council meeting, rather than creating a strategic or problem-solving approach.

Among some Commanders, there was also clearly frustration that police professionals have not been able to convey to members how policing has changed (especially around the closure of police buildings), and the new realities of 'what works?' and what can and can't be afforded. There was also some frustration at a preference among some members for local 'outputs' rather than longer term 'outcomes' mean, and of a lack of understanding of the difference between good increases and bad increases in reporting of crime types.

This 'micro-focus' was also reflected in the general lack of connection of PCSPs and Policing Committees with the Northern Ireland Policing Plan. As a result, the Policing Plan is in effect a PSNI-document at local level, rather than the joint programme of all agencies and PCSPs with responsibility for policing. Furthermore, there was a tendency at local level to avoid many of the most contentious issues including flags and bonfires, public order around parades, counter-terrorism and paramilitarism and legacy issues. These issues seldom appear in local Policing Plans even though they are of considerable importance to confidence in policing across Northern Ireland and take up a considerable amount of time at Northern Ireland level and in the media and demand a significant proportion of the police's time and resources.

Recommendations

14. The strategic and problem-solving elements of Policing Committees should be strengthened through closer participation by members in planning processes and clearer responsibility for co-delivering outcomes in local Policing Plans for PCSP Members.

15. It should be made clear that the primary function of PCSPs and Policing Committees is not to deliver to specific neighbourhood interests, but to deliver an effective policing service across each District.

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