Participation, ‘responsivity’ and accountability in neighbourhood policing

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Abstract

Neighbourhood policing, a contemporary form of community policing developed in the UK, has sought to increase public participation in policing and to develop processes through which residents work in co-production with partners and other state agencies to tackle problems. The aim has been to create mechanisms through which residents can hold the police service to account in dealing with the problems that matter to them. Drawing on interviews with neighbourhood policing officers, this article examines the operation of these processes in practice. We focus on the nature of resident participation in neighbourhood policing; the extent to which police officers organise their priorities around those of residents who participate; and, the ways in which officers work with other state agencies and residents themselves to tackle certain problems. Ultimately, this article questions the notions of accountability embedded in neighbourhood policing and whether the neighbourhood policing approach offers an effective mechanism for holding officers to account by residents.

Key words

Community policing, democracy, participation, responsabilisation, accountability

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Introduction

There is no simple or widely agreed upon definition of what constitutes a democratic police service (Marx, 2001). Over time, the notion of democratic policing has been tied to and invoked in respect to: procedural regularity and the rule of law; respect for certain substantive rights; popular participation in policing, either through civilian oversight or through the processes of responsibilisation; giving police officers themselves a degree of control over the nature of their work; and ‘sundry other fixes under the slogan community policing’ (Sklansky, 2005: 1701). This article focuses on the ‘sundry other fixes’ – community policing – which have been at the heart of contemporary movements to render the police service more ‘democratic’ for some time. Community policing is often represented as synonymous with democratic policing but such a representation is inaccurate (Bayley, 2009). Instead, community policing emphasises working with communities to achieve shared objectives and when operating in genuine partnership with communities *might* fulfil a responsiveness criteria for democratic policing (Bayley, 2009).

This article focuses on neighbourhood policing, a form of community policing which has been operating in England and Wales since the turn of the century. The first part of the article seeks to embed community and neighbourhood policing styles in a set of discourses concerned with rendering police practice more directly accountable to citizens. Drawing on empirical evidence, the second part of the article examines how officers seek to implement such principles in practice. In the discussion we consider the extent to which neighbourhood policing might be viewed to be democratic on the criteria it sets for itself.

Democracy, new localism and community policing

Contemporary reform of democratic systems has been characterized by attempts to redistribute power from political elites to citizens in order to allow citizens to make decisions for themselves and to control those made by governments (Bogdanor, 2009). In the UK, these ideals have become bound-up in political debates pertaining

to forms of governance referred as ‘new localism’ over recent years. For advocates of new localism conventional understandings of democracy – the primacy of the protection of fundamental citizen rights and freedom of organisation and assembly for groups and individuals – are retained but understanding of the building blocks of democracy and the nature of accountability diverge (Stoker 2004). Most clearly, new localism draws attention to the limitations of the election of representatives as the foundations of democracy and accountability (Stoker, 2004). New Localism stresses a local dimension in determining the nature of services; plurality of provision; and a process of accountability which goes beyond choosing elected representatives, to giving residents opportunities to be involved with service provision, to judge performance and engage in exchange with service providers (Stoker, 2004). Let us consider how the ideals have found their way into contemporary UK police reform.

The technologies through which community policing operate ‘can be translated, allied and, modified within a range of democratic political rationalities, programmes and strategies operating within the broad sphere of liberal mentalities of government’ (Stenson, 1993: 381). Accordingly, the emphasis given to community policing and the mechanisms through which it operates vary over space and time shaped by the context within which it is operating. The development of neighbourhood policing was shaped by a range of factors - in particularly by the imagery of ‘broken windows’ which drew attention to the role of the police service in order maintenance and crime prevention which extends far beyond the enforcement of the criminal law (Kelling 1999). However, the expansion of the approach is firmly situated within the New Labour government’s attempts to ‘articulate a value-based politics that would connect State, civil society and citizenry’ (McLaughlin, 2005: 477). The New Labour police reform agenda, with its focus on central monitoring and performance management has generally been characterised as centralised, managerialist and ‘top down’ in nature. This approach was blamed for obstructing the development of structures of local accountability and limiting community involvement in decision-making processes (McLaughlin, 2005). Neighbourhood policing was premised on the ideal that accountability in policing is delivered most effectively through responsive policing teams operating at the local level (Jones, 2008). The aim was to force the police service to become ‘more accountable to local democratic structures and to their local community’ rather than to Whitehall (Home Office 2004: 11). This represents what

Savage (2007: 314) referred to as a 'bifurcation' of the police reform agenda characterised by disempowerment of the police in some areas but empowerment in others. Whilst clearly a New Labour initiative, neighbourhood policing is also embedded in the Conservative-led coalition's evolving police reform agenda. Much of their discourse on neighbourhood policing, which stresses the need to 'move beyond the era of bureaucratic accountability to one of democratic accountability' (Home Office 2010: 7), resonates strongly with that of New Labour. In practice this means moving beyond a situation where public officials or elected representatives make decisions on behalf of citizens to one where citizens mould those decisions themselves.

The emphasis of neighbourhood policing then is on the participation of ordinary citizens, as it has been in manifestations of community policing around the globe. Access and input to policing through elected officials is considered to be necessary but insufficient and advocates of community policing stress that citizens should have direct access to police organisations to shape police policies and decision making (Cordner, 1995). This may be assumed to operate informally as, through spending time in communities, officers come to learn about local people, their problems and priorities or formally through creating new opportunities for residents to get directly involved in the decision making processes that concern the delivery of local services (Skolnick and Bayley, 1988). Indeed, formal attempts to make the 'consumer's voice heard more clearly' have been evident in the governance of policing in England and Wales since the 1980s (Morgan, 1987: 91). In the 1970s community participation in policing was virtually non-existent (McLaughlin, 1994) but the requirement to consult has subsequently been enshrined in legislation, guidance and inspectorate recommendations (Elliott and Nicholls, 1996). These moves are inevitably bound up in questions regarding how officers use their discretion to determine priorities and allocate resources (Morgan, 1987). Indeed, one of the reasons for calls for democratic control over operational policy is precisely because the 'doctrine of accountability to the law offers the police no guidance about how their unavoidable discretion should be exercised' (Morgan, 1987: 92) (see also Goldstein 1963). Community policing is designed to re-structure police decision making – moving discretionary judgements about the problems that officers will and will not focus on from officers to residents. Such conceptions of accountability have appealed to police reformers because they

appear to be *more* democratic than conventional policing styles (Sklansky, 2005: 1779).

Reflecting the discourse of community policing, neighbourhood policing should empower residents to orient officers in directions that the community, rather than the police, favour (Savage, 2007: 325) and the approach ‘foregrounds the possibility of more direct face-to-face forms of accountability, or indeed deliberative, trust-based policing and new service delivery models.’ (McLaughlin, 2005: 485). This ‘new service delivery model’ should operate through a cyclical process of consultation, action and feedback, the nature of which we consider in detail throughout this paper. The process amounts to ‘constructing a knowledge base about the driver of insecurities in the neighbourhoods where officers are working and providing the opportunity for local people to democratically influence how they are policed’ (Innes, 2006: 235). At least in principle, practice may well be very different, an issue to which we now turn.

Neither the principles on which new localism, community policing – incorporating its latest reincarnation, neighbourhood policing – lie nor its practice are without critics. First, it has been argued that involving communities in decision making introduces complexity, is parochial and that ‘progressive politics may need a wider canvass than local politics can provide’ (Stoker, 2006: 176). Indeed, the community policing movement has persistently been faulted for assuming the existence of a unitary and easily defined community (Sklansky, 2005: 1780). Second, commentators have argued that whilst the rhetoric of new localism might be strong, the overriding, long term trend of governance has been to centralise (see Bogdanor, 2009). New localism may become meaningless ‘in the face of an overwhelming raft of central government targets, inspections and standards’ (Pratchett, 2004: 370). We have seen that neighbourhood policing sits in contrast to other developments in police reform. Indeed, McLaughlin (2005: 485) draws attention to how ‘serious questions have to be posed about whether there is genuine Whitehall commitment to support localised, post-managerial forms of police accountability’. Third, to operate effectively residents have to get involved in the design and delivery of policing services. Traditionally resident attendance at police community consultation has been low. Lastly, critiques of direct political processes draw attention to how priorities become distorted toward

the minority who participate, potentially skewing priorities towards those who already enjoy political advantages (Bogdanor, 2009: 300). In short, local decision making may foster inequality thus undermining the democratic principles the approach was seeking to promote.

The remainder of this paper is concerned with exploring the operationalization of the core themes on which neighbourhood policing is premised and to reflect upon whether the process can, as is purported, provide a mechanism through which citizens can democratically shape police practice. Despite the endurance of community policing, that its practice is fraught with difficulties is fairly well documented. Nevertheless, we believe it is important to continue to empirically examine the assumptions on which community policing lie. There continues to be significant investment in community policing both in the UK and around the world.

Neighbourhood policing is a core mechanism through which successive UK governments have sought to operate features of a new localism agenda – one that looks likely to remain a key feature of the policing landscape despite (or perhaps because) of cuts to the police service. In addition, there have been very few empirical examinations of the operation of neighbourhood policing that go beyond evaluations of the outputs and outcomes of the programme (see Mason, 2009; Quinton and Morris, 2008; Tuffin et al, 2006) to consider how core themes are understood and operationalized by officers in practice. This is potentially problematic given the high levels of discretion and interpretive ability that practitioners have been shown to possess (Lipsky, 1980).

A study was conducted examining the practice of neighbourhood policing in one county police service in England. A total of 25 interviews were undertaken in 2010. The participants in these interviews held a variety of posts. About two thirds were neighbourhood police officers. The officers were generally experienced and had been in the police service, either as neighbourhood officers or in other roles, for a long time. Plural policing is a feature of neighbourhood policing and Police Community Support Officers (PCSOs) (uniformed but non-warranted police officers) have been widely used to provide a visible presence in neighbourhoods (see Johnston, 2005) and so PCSOs comprised most of the remaining sample although a small number of police managers and support staff were also interviewed. The interviewees were not a

representative of all views, but were chosen in order that a range of opinions from experienced police personnel could be canvassed. Of course, these are police views and limitations of the study meant that we could not consider the views of residents.

The officers that we interviewed had a strong commitment to neighbourhood policing: *'the best job in the world'* (PC/02). However, whilst officers may well have been committed to working with and for communities they were not necessarily committed to faithfully following the formal processes embedded in neighbourhood policing. The forthcoming sections explore the nature of relationships between citizens and neighbourhood police officers. We consider how officers prioritise problems for attention and ultimately, allocate resources in an environment where resources are finite. We examine the mechanisms of responsabilization embedded in neighbourhood policing, concentrating on the roles played by residents and non-police partners in tackling problems. Finally, we consider police-community feedback mechanisms.

Community participation in neighbourhood policing

The officers we interviewed believed that the neighbourhood teams were popular with members of the public on the whole: *'we feel very valued in our communities'* (PC/01). They offered three interacting reasons to explain this popularity. First, the officers are visible and provide a *'friendly face'* (PC/01). Second, they help build bridges with communities. One officer noted *'I would say they had lost faith in the police'* (PC/02). Third, officers may be held accountable to local people with one officer suggesting *'they like the fact they can have a name that they can hold responsible'* (PC/06). However, this 'popularity' did not necessarily mean that members of the public were keen to work with the police to identify and resolve problems. Problems of both limited and differential citizen involvement in neighbourhood policing were noted. Officers reported at least two areas where citizens need to get involved for neighbourhood policing to function – they need to express their preferences for local priorities and get involved in developing and implementing suitable interventions to tackle them. It is clear that this does not always happen. We start with a discussion of the former returning to the latter later in the article.

Officers have been expected to identify problems which are priorities for local people. This may operate informally through embedding neighbourhood officers in community structures and so building contacts and relationships, and formally via networks of public meetings which give residents an opportunity to express preferences for policing priorities. Our focus is on the formal structures of neighbourhood policing and to operate effectively, the police service must attract the participation of residents. As noted, a well-documented feature of community policing has been failure to attract such participation, a theme that ran through the accounts of the officers: *'I mean if you look at things like parish councils, panel meetings, surgeries, things like that, the attendance is very low and it tends to be the same characters, the same faces all the time'* (PCSO/05). For officers, participation was characterised by the persistent presence of a small core of residents – *'professional meeting-goers'* (PC/01) – who routinely attended consultation meetings. That political promotion of the ideals of new localism may not translate into popular participation is well understood. Indeed, it has been officially acknowledged. Neighborhood policing discourse has stressed the need for police-community consultation to go beyond the *'image of the same few people sitting around in a local hall,'* to ensure that neighbourhood level engagement is inclusive, and takes an innovative approach to maximising attendance (Home Office, 2010). Guidance has consistently stressed the need to advertise events widely and to show flexibility about the timing and venue of the meetings in order to maximise attendance (ACPO/NCPE, 2006; Tuffin et al, 2006; HMIC, 2008; Home Office, 2010). The officers' accounts demonstrated that the history of low participation has been well recognised. Indeed is a matter of concern for them, a point to which we return to shortly. Officers reported routinely adapting consultation practice in an attempt to increase attendance at meetings:

'So I had a look at it and thought well this is a real waste of resources, where are people going? We changed it to places like the post office, the village shop, the pub, places that people tend to meet in and holding our surgeries there, rather than expecting people to come to us, which generally they don't do (Pc07).

As the quote suggests, officers described how they had held meetings in places where residents routinely congregate; changed the times that meetings were held; and, where relevant, incorporated neighbourhood policing processes into pre-existing forms of

community consultation (such as parish or tenant meetings). None of this reportedly made much difference to participation, we return to the issue later in the article.

Identifying problems

Neighbourhood policing calls for officers to be responsive to and focus their attention on priorities identified by residents. Reflecting the critical commentary of Loader (2006), a primary issue for officers is prioritizing problems in a context where there is little agreement about which are the most pressing problems facing a community. First, officers reported that what matters to local people could well be at variance to what matters to the police service as an organisation: *'Yeah that's really hard ... it's always going to be a point of friction where what matters to the local people might not be our priority'* (Pc07). The nature of this variance is captured through the distinction between problems which are criminal (e.g. burglary and vehicle crime) and problems which affect people's quality of life, such as littering, low level anti-social behaviours and certain traffic related issues. Officers discussed how they were asked to tackle *'all sorts'* (PC/08) and *'a bit of everything really'* (PCSO/02). However residents prioritise the 'quality of life' issues which, despite an acknowledgement of the wide range of problem types that configure citizen feelings of security, and that in maintaining social order the police service has a remit to consider these issues (Kelling, 1999), are not necessarily priorities for the police service as an organisation:

'I think they're completely different [...] the local issues are rarely the force concerns. So Class A drugs, violence, burglary and vehicle crime [prioritised by the police service] very rarely would come up as a concern at a community meeting. They do occasionally but very rarely' (PC/07).

Second, officers do not necessarily agree with residents about which are the most pressing problems affecting a neighbourhood. This relates primarily to perception of 'risk.' As Loader (2006: 206) notes citizen demands for order are unlikely to be *'based upon cool, sober calculations of risk.'* Instead when citizens are asked to express their views on policing they are articulating *'a series of fears about, and hopes for, the political community in which they live and to the insecurities that flow from their sense of place within it'* (Loader 2006: 207). These points were reinforced by the experiences of officers: *'It's a lot to do with the perception of the individual*

who's making the complaint, what they feel is right and what they feel is wrong. (PCS03). And similarly:

'A lot of the things with neighbourhoods are perception, and what I perceive as a problem, or what I could perceive as not a problem. But an old lady down the road, she might not have experienced that before, that I deal with every day, so my perception of something as a problem might be totally different to the old lady' (PC02).

Officers' tended to have some sympathy with the residents but this disjuncture in perceptions of risk was sometimes the cause of frustration. Officers seemed somewhat resigned to being asked to deal with an endless stream of low level issues which, they felt, they were unlikely to be able to do much about: *'Sometimes people think the police can and should be able to deal with all problems including next door's cat or the wind blowing litter around'* (PC/01). Third, residents' views may well be at odds with one another. The problematic nature of community sets the scene for this issue. Neighbourhood policing has been organised around tightly defined geographical areas. For officers defining community is certainly *'a difficult question'* (PC/01) but it is perhaps not surprising that they tended to describe 'community' in terms of these administrative arrangements: *'people who live and work or visit a particular area'* (PCSO/03). However, officers were very conscious that geographical proximity did not equate to consensus of views about priorities for policing and that there can be wide variance in what residents ask them to deal with.

Officers then have to balance these different priorities and opinions about the allocation of police resources. The officers that we interviewed reported high levels of discretion and a great deal of responsibility to develop their own roles and *'do whatever you want'* (PC/03). We consider now how officers balance the priorities and come to make decisions about resource allocation in the following sections. In spite of the doctrine of neighbourhood policing, in some sets of circumstances force priorities do take precedence over those raised by residents. For example, neighbourhood officers often gave examples of being asked to perform certain tasks – especially patrol – in the name of meeting force level targets for volume crimes. Neighbourhood officers sometimes stated that officers working in other parts of the organisation did

not understand their role and, in turn, they were asked to perform tasks that were inappropriate. Whilst this suggests that the principles of neighbourhood policing have not permeated the whole organisation, it would be wrong to state that police service priorities *dominate* neighbourhood officer activity:

We've got to be seen to be doing Force priorities as a rule But we've also got to be selfish and say: well actually yeah we've got to look after our communities as well because that's who we serve, and if they've got issues on a Thursday night or a Friday night, after school in a certain village, then as the local team we should be there, despite the fact that burglaries are high and they want us to be up early in the morning catching somebody. We've got to juggle and think, what is more important?
(PC/01)

Officers will focus on resident priorities, even circumnavigating requests to concentrate on force priorities, when they believe their attention should be elsewhere. This raises a new set of questions. We have seen that officers do not always agree with the priorities raised by residents, who in turn may well not agree with one another. How officers deal with this varies. One problem, noted by a number of commentators, has been that *'the image of total objectivity-of impartiality-and of enforcement without fear nor favour'* has rendered officers reluctant to determine what should be the greatest concern to the community (Goldstein, 1963: 144). Morgan (1987) also argues that police service defence of operational independence makes it difficult for officers to communicate with citizens about the most serious problems that they face. However, rather than being *'hoist by their own petard'* (Morgan, 1987: 92) we found that officers did invite residents to reflect widely on the nature of the problems a community faced and, through sharing information in this way, they hoped to reach compromise: *'So it's a balancing act of our time and I think sometimes I think it's raising awareness in a local community for example burglary dwellings and car crime will always be a [named area] police priority crime'* (Pc07). This sometimes seems to be successful – *'actually when they listen to what other people's issues are and what they've got to say about them, it can change what they vote on'* (Pc04) – but where compromise cannot be reached, meeting attendees may be asked to vote to determine the neighbourhood priorities. Voting to determine priorities in this way is very much in keeping with national guidelines on neighbourhood policing

though officers were often sceptical about doing so, largely because of the aforementioned issue of low attendance:

‘I don't do that. I find it a little bit false because if you had a low turnout and a couple of people voted on an issue that you know from patrolling an area, what the real concern is, you're getting a false picture from the voting system which isn't really a true picture of what the local community thinks’ (PC07).

That said officers were clear that if residents prioritised a problem at a public meeting in this or any other way they would not publically disagree with that issue. On the face of it, officers are following the neighbourhood policing rhetoric which has made so much of organising police activity around resident priorities. But this may well mean that the opinions of small groups of vocal meeting attendees do become prioritised, something that did agitate officers: *‘I think it's a bit [of a] silly system really, but that is what we're told to do’ (PCSO/4)*. Come what may, officers do not respond to the issues raised by residents in a straightforward manner. In the absence of a clear steer and in the context of fixed resources, resolving these conflicting perspectives and opinions – both within communities and between police and communities – in order to determine neighbourhood priorities becomes a complex task for officers who sometimes referred to being *‘creative’ (PC/03)*. An overriding concern is the management of resources in a context where resources are limited. As Lipsky (1980) argues agencies that provide public goods must devise ways to ration them and indeed officers employ various strategies to do so. First, officers might do nothing at all:

You've got sometimes [to] be blunt and say ‘we're aware of it but we've got to be dealing with another issue or with, you know, the issue that you think you're having, yes we understand it's an issue to yourself but it's something that [...] we can't get involved in or it's not a police matter’ (PC0/1).

Certainly officers will seek to circumvent issues that they believe would be best addressed by another agency, an issue to which we return shortly. A second way that officers may seek to circumvent resident concerns is to monitor them over time:

Well the one that's voted in at the police community meetings will be tackled, whether we think it's an issue or not an issue. That's the panel meetings. But it may be tackled by us measuring the problem and actually going back to the next meeting and saying look we've measured this, we've monitored it, we've monitored it, we've re-measured it you know. You need to show us some evidence that there's actually a problem.
(PC/04)

Given the comments regarding the officers' views on the nature of resident understanding of problems, officers reported that in justifying resource allocation, evidence of wide distribution of problems may be required: *'you've obviously got to manage that you have to explain why, you know, we need to, we have limited resources, we need to justify our resources to our sergeants, to inspectors etc'* (PC/04). This may incorporate further consultation – *'I think the real answer to that is the feedback you get from other sources as well as the panel meeting or the parish council'* (PC07) – or by conducting some basic research on the issue. Residents themselves may well be expected to get involved in conducting measurements (e.g. speed checks or environmental audits) to demonstrate the scale of a problem in order to facilitate officers' intervention – an interesting extension of the notion of responsibilisation perhaps. That said, resident complaints – at public meetings or via another route – were viewed by officers to be a way of focusing officer attention on an issue: *It's like any job, the more people that complain about something, the more resources we can throw at it* (PC/03). Third, officers also reported that they might intervene in a low level way by, for example, patrolling an area or visiting a reportedly problematic venue. Lastly, officers noted that they might look at other problems, ones that they consider more important, alongside the ones identified at the panel meeting:

What we can do is off our own initiative is set up another one. So say for example I've currently got parking going on at the moment, that's their top priority, so I'm doing parking. In addition to that with the summer months we do antisocial behaviour patrol. So although theirs is still running, we tag another one on as well. (PCSO/5)

Resolving neighbourhood problems

Officers have been expected to resolve problems drawing on the technologies of 'problem-solving' (Goldstein, 1990) which emphasise the systematic analysis of crime problems, the wide-ranging search for solutions (which should go beyond the enforcement of the criminal law) and evaluation of responses. Officers demonstrated mixed awareness and understanding of this approach, something well documented in the literature (Bullock et al 2006). Rather than following processes, officers tended to stress that neighbourhood policing practice was '*down to just basically good old instinct and my experience*' (PC06). Indeed, it was striking how officers drew on a 'stock' of routinely used interventions in tackling problems. There was a strong law enforcement emphasis and extra patrols were regularly seen as a solution. Where officers looked beyond the enforcement of the criminal law, responses were still somewhat routinized. Responses to traffic problems, which are often drawn into the neighbourhood policing remit, included conducting speed checks, referral to a casualty reduction officer and the establishment of 'Community Speed Watch' schemes. Similarly in tackling antisocial behaviour officers tended to conduct extra patrols or look to contractual agreements such as Acceptable Behaviour Contracts and Anti-social Behaviour Orders.

Perhaps more importantly in the context of this article, neighbourhood policing seeks to diffuse responsibility for solving problems to residents and other partners. For New Labour '*effective partnership working is absolutely key to delivering success*' (HMIC, 2008: 35) and for the Conservative-led coalition the '*Solutions to local problems are often best found within communities, and drawing back the state will allow neighbourhood activists and groups to come forward and play their full role*' (Home Office 2010: 36). The notion of responsibilisation was conceived in different ways and to different degrees by officers. First, as noted residents tend to prioritise 'quality of life' over 'crime' problems and, given that the former may not routinely fit into the remit of the police service, diffusion of responsibility to other statutory agencies is essential. The officers participating in this study were a little reluctant to comment on the nature of their relationships with partner agencies, which might have been because of an on-going review of the organisation of the neighbourhood policing in the host force. However, it certainly cannot be assumed that officers will be able to diffuse responsibility for dealing with the concerns raised by residents to other agencies - '*Oh dear. We pass the information on to the council and if they choose to follow it up it's*

up to them. It's probably the diplomatic answer' (PC/06) - a point which recurs in the literature (Foster 2002; Innes, 2005; Souhami, 2007). Second, neighbourhood policing looks to dissolve responsibility to residents. Whilst some officers were cynical about the role of residents in solving problems – *'I would rather the community didn't get involved as they might make things worse!'* (PC/01) – resident involvement in solving problems was viewed by many officers as essential: *'its not just about the police waving their magic wand, it's about involving the public in it'* (PC/02).

The process of diffusing responsibility to residents was conceived in interchangeable ways by officers. Sometimes 'taking responsibility' was about placing the onus on residents and communities to control their own behaviour – *'A lot of our job is being able to delegate as well, you know, back to the people who it's their responsibility, you know, if it's a child and you have parents, then that's their responsibility'* (PC03) – and other times about encouraging residents to report incidents, act as witnesses and give statements in order to facilitate the control of others. However, responsabilisation was much more commonly viewed in terms of residents proactively developing, running and managing longer term solutions to problems. Officers universally drew attention to how it is difficult to facilitate such participation: *'It's quite difficult to get people involved. It's the same people that get involved usually, you know, the people that are scout leaders, that are part of church groups'* (Pc06). Officers were well aware that some people, and some groups of people, will not work with police officers: some residents may feel intimidated; they may only see the enforcement focus of the police service; or there may be historical or cultural factors which shape perceptions of the service. Where residents might be prepared to get involved, they may lack the time or initiative to do so. However, it was not clear that residents had been offered opportunities to get involved. Rather than think broadly about how residents might be mobilised, officers tended to look to engage established community groups to help address specific sets of circumstances: *'I wouldn't specifically task them [residents] to get involved unless there were things community groups were doing anyway'* (PC/01). For some officers doing so was reportedly straightforward: *'There's good community links [...] strong links with schools, churches, shops [...] it's quite easy to network quickly and get involved in different areas of the community'* (Pc 07). But it was more commonly stated that generating

interest was difficult, raising questions about sustaining community involvement where such structures do not exist.

Feedback

As we have seen, ultimately neighbourhood policing should form a mechanism through which residents can hold officers to account in dealing with the problems they prioritise: *'Feedback to the community is also vitally important ... Feedback and the simple art of keeping people informed are exceptionally powerful drivers to build trust and confidence'* (HMIC, 2008: 39). Guidance has had less to say on how this might be achieved in practice, save that it should be *'delivered by methods to suit that community and within agreed timescales'* (HMIC, 2008: 39). Reflecting the guidance, officers tended to conceive feedback in terms of *'keeping people informed'*: *'It's pretty much just keeping in contact in honesty'* (PCSO5). In practice, the emphasis is on reporting back to complainants, be it in a meeting or individual setting: *'I try and go back to the original complainants because, in the day and age of customer service, they are the customer'* (PC/06). For officers, whether the approach is deemed successful or not is shaped by whether complaints continue to be received:

'If it comes up as, you know, a neighbourhood priority and it's come up at a panel meeting and it's brought up at the next one we find out if everybody's happy with the end results and what's going on. And again just actually talking to people in the area where the problem might be occurring after a while and seeing if yes everything has worked'. (PCSO/3)

Discussion

Whilst the rationales for and practice of community policing has varied, depending on the time and jurisdiction within which it has been implemented, we have sought to situate a contemporary form of community policing, neighbourhood policing, within the parameters of new localism. Democracy, conceived from this position, must comprise a role for local communities in local decision making; incorporate residents in determining the provision and substance of local services; and tailor solutions to local needs and circumstances. The aim is to create mechanisms through which citizens can directly hold public servants, rather than elected representatives, to

account for tackling the problems that matter to them. The notions are present in New Labour and Coalition rhetorical statements on police reform. After considering the basis for contemporary experiments with such an approach in England and Wales, this article has documented the process in one police service and we finish with a discussion of the implications for understanding democratic policing, with a focus on participation, responsiveness and accountability.

The approach is premised on a greater role for citizens in local decision making. Although the mechanisms of consultation have evolved since the 1980s, a recurrent theme, one present in this study, is low citizen participation. This immediately casts doubts on any claim that community policing might have to be ‘democratic’. On the one hand, as Stoker (2004: 154 our emphasis) notes ‘a democratic system does not require the participation of all the people or all of the time: rather, its defining characteristic is its *openness* to all’. On the other hand, the risk is that ‘the mere *possibility* of participation can be invoked to legitimize decisions as democratic. Used in this way, participatory democracy becomes a rhetoric of apology’ (Sklansky, 2005: 1766).

The approach is premised on a strong local dimension in determining the provision and substance of local services. Commentators highlight two contrasting risks of attempting to orient policing services around the preferences of residents. First, whilst police must ‘*relinquish some of their power to define those issues that they will or will not work on*’ (Innes, 2005: 166) there is a risk that police priorities continue to dominate (Elliott and Nicholls, 1996; Quinton and Morris, 2008; Foster and Jones, 2010). We have seen that neighbourhood policing does not involve the police relinquishing power to residents in a straightforward manner. The context for this, at least in part, is the centralised and ‘managerial’ dimension of local governance and policing which, as noted in the introduction, sits somewhat uneasily with the localism agenda. However, whilst force priorities clearly loom large; these are mediated by the discretionary activities of police officers, which we return to shortly. This brings us to the second risk: that the priorities of a vocal minority of residents come to dominate the processes of neighbourhood policing which in turn increase rather than decrease facets of social (in)equality (Loader, 2006). The inherently diverse nature of communities makes it implausible that officers could possibly account for the

diversity of opinions and perceptions of risk even if they had the resources to do so. This diversity of opinion does not necessarily render neighbourhood policing undemocratic. Instead it means, as Sklansky (2005: 1810) notes, which the approach *'cannot rely on the notion that there is a unified community with desires that are clear, coherent, and consistent'*. Indeed, this article has drawn attention to how officers are very well aware of the diversity of opinion and share some of the concerns about the potential for distortion where police priorities are arranged around the priorities of the few who participate in the formal structures of neighbourhood policing. This brings us back to the central role of discretion. For some commentators greater community oversight should form a mechanism for structuring the discretionary activities of police officers (Goldstein, 1963; Kelling, 1999). This article has drawn attention to how a primary role of the neighbourhood officer is to mediate the varying demands of residents and the police service, in the context of limited resources and we have drawn attention to the ways that they ration the allocation of their time. As Lipsky (1980) notes, practitioners see discrepancies between what they are being asked to do, their own experiences and what is achievable within the resources available. Discretionary decisions by officers are inevitable in the context of limited resources and limited agreement about the nature of the problems communities face. Whilst the officers we spoke to had sympathy for the principles of community policing they were less wedded to its specific processes. Accordingly they adapted policies and practices to make the process work – a value of discretion perhaps. But this raises new questions about the nature of accountability embedded in neighbourhood policing and the extent to which communities can structure the discretionary activities of officers, a point to which we return.

Neighbourhood policing is premised on the view that solutions need to be tailored to local needs and circumstances – for here equity of provision does not mean equality of provision – drawing on the mobilization of local resources. We have seen an emphasis on law enforcement and somewhat routine responses to problems. This calls into question how widely officers are thinking beyond 'off the peg' solutions when responding to local needs and circumstances. Officers also struggled to mobilise local resources – both statutory and non-statutory. That the processes of responsabilization are not straightforward is well documented in the extant literature. Statutory agencies resist the call to work in concert with the police for a combination of resource and

cultural factors and residents resist for a range of normative and practical reasons. However, officers drew attention to how resident involvement, where evident, tends to result from the mobilization of pre-existing formal community structures. This has implications for the nature of resident involvement because we know that these structures proliferate more readily in wealthier, low crime rate areas (Hope, 1995). However, it also points to a relatively limited conception of the nature of resident participation – in this police service at least – and it may be that more could be done to generate wider mobilization of residents.

Ultimately neighbourhood policing should enable residents to hold officers to account – in order to offer the more ‘mature’ version of democracy advocated by some. This article has drawn attention to how officers do not respond to residents’ concerns in a straightforward way. It is clear that officers are arbitrating between different points of view and navigating structural constraints which include the availability of resources as well as limits to their knowledge and expertise. In this context citizens’ demands for policing will not always be met by the police (or by anyone else). Community policing seeks to offer an alternative way of configuring the discretionary activities of officers to allocate resources in ways that the residents, rather than officers prioritise. That we know little about how officers do so raises yet new questions about the nature of accountability embedded in neighbourhood policing.

Conclusion

We do not know if the tenets of new localism will represent a ‘passing policy fad’ or an overarching vision for central–local relations for decades to come (Pratchett, 2004: 370). Community policing has been an omnipresent feature of police reform and its themes, which have crossed time and jurisdictions, are likely to endure. The article has sought to situate the operation of neighbourhood policing within debates about new localism to consider whether it offers, as many advocate, a more rounded approach to local democracy. Whether forms of community policing can be viewed as ‘democratic’ depends on many things. Fundamentally it depends on one’s conception of the meaning of democracy. As Bayley (2009) notes, community policing cannot be viewed as democratic *in and of itself* but a focus on citizen participation, police responsiveness and local accountability – associated with some manifestations of

community policing – may foreground the possibility of policing styles which, for some, appear to be more democratic than traditional forms of policing. Even so, much depends on how the approach operates in practice and most importantly on the outcomes affected. Certainly one has to be sceptical about the claims made by advocates of community policing. This article has drawn attention to now familiar themes: low and patchy public participation; conflict between resident and police priorities; and unenthusiastic ‘partnership’ involvement. Whilst officers have sympathy with the aims of community policing we have drawn attention to how officers manage and manipulate aspects of these processes to make neighbourhood policing function in a context of limited agreement regarding priorities and limited resources. In doing so officers deviate from formal processes and they ration the allocation of resources in conditions of low visibility. Ultimately, one has to caution against unrealistic expectations of the role community policing can play in facilitating new forms of democratic practice. As Manning (2010: 7) notes, ‘The idea that the police should be the leaders – that they can somehow encourage, create, sustain, strengthen, or otherwise be part of producing a democratic state – is getting the argument backward. It is a democratic state and culture that produce democratic policing, and there is no evidence that the contrary can result’.

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