COMMENTARY

Journal of
COMMUNITY SAFETY & WELL-BEING

Regaining the trust of communities: What can we learn from the return of neighbourhood policing to England and Wales

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INTRODUCTION

The UK government has announced significant financial investment in neighbourhood policing, with 13,000 police officers, community support officers and volunteer special constables to patrol communities (Home Office, 2024). Neighbourhood policing is about connecting with communities, building a culture of mutual trust and confidence with the public, identifying problems and targeting offenders whilst providing solutions to perennial community problems. The College of Policing (2023a) highlights the vital role neighbourhood policing has in keeping the public safe.

In a similar way, police forces across Canada continue to invest in community policing initiatives. Mehmi et al. (2021) discuss the introduction of Neighbourhood Community Officers by the Toronto Police Service and how this is gradually improving trust with hard-to-reach communities, whilst Hodgkinson and Pringle (2023) explore an alternate approach to community reassurance by the police service in Saskatoon, a city with high crime rates. Dumas et al. (2021) highlight from their research in Quebec how interest in the policing of communities wanes as other aspects of policing become the priority.

Yet, as in England and Wales, police forces across nations continue to struggle with limited finances, resources and trust by the public. There are, though, opportunities to evaluate approaches in different jurisdictions (Hodgkinson & Pringle, 2023). We should do more to share and evaluate alternate approaches to solving perennial policing issues, as such the authors have detailed neighbourhood policing across England and Wales to aid discussion and inform opportunities for collaborative research.

NEIGHBOURHOOD POLICING IN ENGLAND AND WALES

As a result of wide-ranging reviews, police forces across England and Wales have recently announced that Neighbourhood Policing Teams (NPTs) are to be reinvigorated with new strategies, structures, funding and resources. NPTs will incorporate multi-agency partnership approaches, part-funded by the Home Office, to tackle and regenerate areas affected by serious and organized crime groups. The government suggests that 50% of crime is committed by 5% of individuals (Gov.UK, 2021), indicating how a small cadre of individuals are at the core of the crime problems. New local policing initiatives will be led by a superintendent, with a focus on place within the neighbourhood, coupled with responsive, proactive and investigative resources, including police officers, community support officers and volunteer special constables being dedicated to each area.

This is good news for communities and is modelled on earlier representations of neighbourhood policing, which were envisaged 20 years earlier and implemented by the roll-out of the National Neighbourhood Policing Plan (Home Office, 2004). This approach is conducive to the requirements of the *Crime and Disorder Act 1998*, placing a responsibility on local authorities as responsible partners to execute an active role in reducing crime and disorder in their areas, a function central to the approach (Sheldon & Williams, 2022). This strategy was also popular with the public, who not only witnessed the efforts of several agencies in resolving perennial problems but also welcomed the visibility of police on the street and, more importantly, a reduction in the fear of crime.

Traditionally, policing in England and Wales was primarily reactive, certainly until the introduction of intelligence-led policing and the National Intelligence Model, which effectively facilitated a shift toward greater proactive policing. In some ways, this dovetailed well with NPTs and the Community Safety Partnerships (CSPs), with partnership working through multi-agency forums mandated by the Crime and Disorder legislation. This corresponds with the move in 1990s New York to transform policing to the three Ps of "prevention, partnerships and problem solving" (Bratton, 2005).

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To cite: Williams, P., & Pepper, I. (2025). Regaining the trust of communities: What can we learn from the return of neighbourhood policing to England and Wales. *Journal of Community Safety and Well-Being*, 10(2), 57–59. https://doi.org/10.35502/jcswb.449

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This, aided by credible intelligence gathered from the local communities themselves, became a far better model of successful policing, and in addition to community problems being resolved outside of the criminal justice system, recorded crime fell to record levels. Whilst there was some criticism directed at the CSPs, there was a clear consensus that partnership working enhanced policing. Unfortunately, the considerable strides forward in partnership working and problem solving were brought to an abrupt halt after the 2008 financial crash, with the implementation of austerity.

Outside of the comfort zone and control of policing, there were compulsory reductions in staff numbers and harsh budget restrictions, with chief officers having little option but to return operational policing to a reactive model. Linked to this, intelligence analysis units were disbanded or merged, and skilled staff left the service, either voluntarily or were left with no choice but to seek other opportunities.

Her Majesty's Inspectorate of Constabulary (HMIC, 2017) raised concerns that local neighbourhood policing was being eroded. The College of Policing continues to highlight the essential nature of neighbourhood policing, with the now His Majesty's Chief Inspector of Constabulary (His Majesty's Inspectorate of Constabulary and Fire & Rescue Services (HMICFRS), 2023) also reiterating its crucial nature, the importance of allocating rather than abstracting resources and the benefits of collaborating with other agencies to assist solving persistent problems. Skogan (1996) highlights how the police need to listen and respond to community concerns, deliver commitments to solve local problems and, as a result, earn the trust of the public, rather than just assuming it exists. Of course, such trust is easily lost.

Intravia et al. (2020) explore how news events shared via social media can impact the trust and legitimacy of the police, acknowledging that the interaction with the media is not the only factor affecting perceptions. However, it certainly appeared that the killing of George Floyd in 2020 in Minneapolis, USA, negatively impacted the public's trust and confidence in policing, leading to wide-scale demonstrations in many nations.

England and Wales have also gained an insight from the College of Policing (2023b) review into the disappearance of Nicola Bulley. The review highlights the impact on confidence in policing when local people, eager to assist, are not properly coordinated and managed, leading to an uncontrollable explosion of comments and speculation on social media. This illustrates the ever-evolving and complex nature of neighbourhood policing, that as well as working in communities, communities of interest on social media also need to be proactively engaged. Community groups need to be engaged, coordinated and professionally directed to assist in resolving the problem.

The Metropolitan Police Service (MPS) specifically has endured a drastic loss of public trust. The Baroness Casey Review (2023) identifies how the MPS is failing women and children, with cases of murder and rape by serving police officers, such as Wayne Couzens and David Carrick, understandably having negative ramifications across policing. Additionally, the impact of austerity on frontline policing and the impact of institutional racism, sexism and homophobia internally, is amplified by 24/7 news and social media. This all impacts the policing of communities, with the loss of trust having implications for the whole police service. HMICFRS reports that trust and confidence in policing is at an all-time low (Cooke, 2023).

If the response of local communities to recent promulgations concerning NPTs is handled effectively, this may assist in turning a corner and herald a "new age" for policing. The initiative to reinvigorate NPTs, if well led, culturally embedded within the service and professionally delivered, will not solve every problem but could go some way in ameliorating this broken relationship and breakdown of trust and confidence, re-building the key principle that policing in the UK is founded on: policing by consent.

The new Labour government appears to have accepted this concept. An announcement in December 2024 committed more police resources to neighbourhood policing, ensuring that each individual neighbourhood will have a named, contactable officer for their communities. The government has named this the "neighbourhood policing guarantee" and views this as a way to challenge the lack of visibility on the streets, anti-social behaviour, knife crime and violence against women and girls (Home Office, 2024).

CONCLUSION

There seems no doubt that trust in policing is low across many communities in England and Wales. Recent events worldwide, shared via social media, have impacted this. However, there are evidence-based models where policing together with communities can be successful. An evaluation of such a partnership approach by the Toronto Police Service suggests that the trust of minority groups toward policing in hard-to-reach communities is gradually improving (Mehmi et al., 2021), but embedding such community-based approaches to policing takes time (Dumas et al., 2021).

From the inception of the *Crime and Disorder Act* until the implementation of austerity, tangible progress was made in England and Wales for neighbourhood policing. This can be replicated once again and as Bratton (2005) asserts, as the police work in partnership with communities, government institutions and the wider criminal justice system, they can have a significant impact on crime and public disorder. This aligns with the vision of community policing and when applied effectively, it is effective. However, as Dumas et al. (2021) suggest, further comparative research across jurisdictions is required.

As the police service in England and Wales finds itself at a crossroads in terms of public confidence and a situation of enhanced accountability, policing jurisdictions should share experiences and learn from each other's successes and failures. Provided chief officers are given the resources as indicated in the government's recent announcement, including reinvigoration of CSPs, the service has the opportunity to ameliorate complex issues and renew public confidence and trust in policing.

FUNDING
None.

CONFLICT OF INTEREST DISCLOSURES
The authors have no conflicts of interest to declare.

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