

EVALUATION OF THE PRIORITY CRIME UNIT IN CENTRAL SCOTLAND POLICE

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INTRODUCTION

In the context of the need to critically examine existing working practices in policing in the light of changing demands and new challenges, Central Scotland Police developed a mixed economy policing model involving both police officers and police staff. This took the form of a Priority Crime Unit (PCU) within its Falkirk Area Command, operational with effect from 1 April 2008.

This evaluation was commissioned through SIPR by Central Scotland Police. The fieldwork was carried out over the period from May 2008 to January 2009 and thus reflected the first 10 months of the PCU's operation. The final report was completed in March 2009 and this briefing paper is based on that report's executive summary.

The model was designed to assist Central Scotland Police in delivering on some of the following issues:-

- enhancing policing capabilities and productivity in the investigation of Group 3 and Group 4 volume crime through a blend of police officers and police staff;
- utilising additional front-line police officer time for high profile and intelligence-led policing activity to tackle antisocial behaviour and crime reduction in local communities;
- increasing performance and quality of service to the public in the areas of investigation of volume crime and standards of delivery; and
- developing a more flexible workforce better able to match resources and skills to demand and making best use of the capacity and capabilities of police officers.

METHODOLOGY

This evaluation is based on the overall aims which Central Scotland Police set for itself in relation to the PCU project. A Balanced Scorecard approach was used to assess the extent to which the mixed economy policing model achieved a balance between four key outcomes:

- Key Outcome 1: To what extent does the Priority Crime Unit contribute to Improved Investigation?
Key Outcome 2: To what extent does the Priority Crime Unit produce a Better Quality of Service?
Key Outcome 3: To what extent does the Priority Crime Unit release Increased Frontline Policing Capacity?
Key Outcome 4: To what extent does the Priority Crime Unit represent Best Value?

CONTEXT

Central Scotland Police has demonstrated considerable initiative in identifying the potential of the workforce modernisation process in England and Wales for its own operations, and in particular one of the pilots carried out by Surrey Police. The mixed economy model establishes an appropriate mix of skills and powers between police officers and police staff as a means of improving the quality of the investigative process and of increasing frontline policing capacity. The Priority Crime Unit sits alongside a number of other developments which together provide a coherent approach to improving the quality of service to the public.

PRIORITY CRIME UNIT OVERVIEW

The general consensus was that the PCU has begun to deliver on its intended aims. Morale within the Unit has been high and members are highly and effectively focused on their tasks.

With regard to the roles of police officers in the Unit, good opportunities have been provided for developing investigation and detective skills, and for gaining experience of first-line management at an early career stage. Care needs to be taken to ensure that high turnover of such officers does not adversely affect the Unit's progress.

It is clear that for members of the public, the status of Investigative Assistants as police staff does not affect their acceptance or their effectiveness in undertaking investigative tasks in relation to Groups 3 and 4 volume crime. The role of the team co-ordinators has been especially important both for monitoring task allocation and for follow-up on quality of service.

The dynamic nature of the Unit's activities and the capabilities demonstrated by staff means that there is likely to be pressure in future on the original task boundaries set for the PCU, which are already beginning to expand into areas not originally identified. There may be scope for reviewing over time the range of tasks, short of police powers but including supervision, which Investigative Assistants could undertake. In this regard, the continuing professional development needs of police staff need to be closely monitored and carefully considered.

The original scepticism and defensiveness of other police officers towards the PCU appears to have abated over a relatively short time. There is evidence of increasing willingness to work in partnership as the benefits and value of the PCU become more apparent to frontline officers. However, the role of the PCU and its relationship to frontline officers needs to be communicated clearly to avoid any lingering misperceptions of de-skilling.

KEY OUTCOME 1: IMPROVED INVESTIGATION

The impact of the PCU is demonstrated clearly in relation to measures concerned with the quality of investigation. There is clear evidence that the PCU has contributed to the significant redistribution of time spent on investigations between police officers and police staff and in helping to reduce the time spent on each investigation.

Possible links to local crime rates and detection rates are more difficult to establish. As the Unit develops, there may be scope for looking again at how the investigative activities carried out by police staff might support detection procedures which relate appropriately to police officers to a greater extent.

Similarly, the impact of the PCU on the police contributions to criminal justice efficiency has been indirect. The undoubted greater efficiencies in that domain have been driven by the Force's Criminal Justice Business Unit, and this confirms the importance of viewing holistically the various strategies being implemented across the Central Scotland Police area.

KEY OUTCOME 2: BETTER QUALITY OF SERVICE

Preliminary evidence from the latest Force quality assurance survey suggests that, where crimes are processed by the PCU, victims' perceptions of service delivery are more positive than with those processed otherwise. This is particularly significant in relation to the routine updating provided to victims on the progress of their cases, the single most consistent issue of dissatisfaction expressed by victims with police service delivery in Scotland.

Victims expressed no problems with investigations being carried out by non-police officers, and in the Falkirk Area many did not recognise that in some cases their contact had been with PCU staff. The feedback received directly from victims has been almost unanimously positive, as are the quality of service communications initiated by the Priority Crime Unit. The practice of ensuring that teams in the Unit are informed of feedback has been very positive for staff morale.

Police staff have used their skills and initiative to develop the quality of service aspects of their work in relation to Group 3 and Group 4 crime and as a result are delivering a level of service which is thorough, comprehensive and effective.

It was clear from interviews with police managers in the Area Command that the importance of the PCU's role in improving quality of service is recognized and regard it as fundamental to its purpose and function.

Given the high importance of the quality of service dimension in contemporary policing, it may be desirable to consider reviewing the police officer - police staff mix in the PCU to maximize the positive relationship which has developed between Investigative Assistants and the public. Their use as a resource for intelligence-gathering may be one area in which IAs have a greater contribution to make.

KEY OUTCOME 3: INCREASED FRONTLINE CAPACITY

The Priority Crime Unit has released time spent by officers on investigation of Group 3 and Group 4 crime to the extent of 19,288 hours, adjusted. The workload of response officers as measured by crime files has been reduced by a monthly average of 52% as a result of redistribution of crime files to the PCU.

Initially, concerns were raised by police officers in Falkirk Area in relation to loss of crime files and de-skilling in the early stages of implementation of the PCU. However, the benefits of workload reduction and the opportunities for officers to develop other aspects of policing were emerging strongly.

The released time and reduced crime file workload of frontline officers was gradually beginning to be utilised. Officers were able to focus more on other aspects of their workload and to provide increased support for new policing operations. At the end of the evaluation period, the full benefits of the PCU to frontline policing had still to be fully realized. In the context of the Force's priorities of high visibility, intelligence-led, community-facing policing, a more proactive and directive approach to tasking of officers could be one way of effectively using the time released by the PCU's activities.

KEY OUTCOME 4: BEST VALUE

The introduction of the PCU has produced non-cashable efficiency savings of £27,000 in the first full year of operation of the Unit, or 6% of pre-implementation and Year 1 costs. With potential for continuous improvement in future years, especially in the re-distribution of frontline capacity towards priorities that require officer powers, this represents a significant improvement in the efficient use of the Force's resources.

CONCLUSIONS

This evaluation examined four key areas emerging from the aims and objectives set by Central Scotland Police for its Priority Crime Unit both as a mixed economy policing model in its own right and as one of a number of developments through which demand for policing is being managed.

These are:

- Improved Investigation
- Better Quality of Service
- Increased Frontline Policing Capacity
- Best Value.

The impact of the Priority Crime Unit is indicated in the Balanced Scorecard overleaf. This is based on a 'traffic light system', in which Green means a positive outcome, Amber indicates caution; and Red signifies a negative outcome.

**Key Outcome 1:
IMPROVED
INVESTIGATION**

**Improved Groups 3 & 4
detection rates**

**Better quality of
investigation of Groups 3 &
4 crimes**

**Reduction in clear-up time of
crime**

**Reduced Groups 3 & 4 crime
rates**

**Key Outcome 4:
BEST
VALUE**

**Compliance with Best Value
criteria**

**Efficiency savings of £22k
over 10 months**

**Key Outcome 2:
BETTER QUALITY
OF SERVICE**

**Very positive feedback from
victims of crime**

**Increased number of reports
to Fiscal
submitted within target
times**

**Fewer reports marked 'no
further action'
by Fiscal**

**Key Outcome 3:
INCREASED
FRONTLINE CAPACITY**

**Increased capacity to
investigate crime through
redistribution of crime file
workload**

**Significant saving of
frontline police officer time**

Increased staff morale

The Mixed Economy Policing model as represented by the Priority Crime Unit scores very positively on three of the four Quadrants, while its direct impact on crime and detection rates requires to be treated with caution. The conclusion of this evaluation is that overall the Priority Crime Unit has been a successful innovation in its first year of operation. In light of this, Central Scotland Police may wish to consider how best to take forward the mixed economy policing model in its other Area Commands for the future.