



INTERACT

The INTERACT (Investigating New Types of Engagement, Response and Contact Technologies in Policing) project explored the use of new technologies in interactions between the police and public, and how police can build legitimacy with various publics amidst changes to police contact.

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Public perspectives on digital police contact: visibility, accessibility and engagement

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Key points

- When people talk about visible and reassuring policing, they tend to mean face-to-face, 'real life', in-person policing. Digital presence, such as social media posts, does not inspire the same confidence or feelings of safety.
- Digital contact, such as via an online reporting form, may be seen as an alternative to long call wait times. But clarity of guidance about what platform to use and how, and acknowledgement of receipt of the information, are of paramount importance. People also have concerns about digital exclusion.
- Two-way communication is required to enhance confidence, both in terms of keeping those contacting the police updated (including via digital means) and engaging with communities in-person to build familiarity.



Background

Social changes and technological advancements have brought shifts in the delivery of services to the public. Recently this has included digital forms of police-public contact, including via social media and online crime reporting. We use the term 'channel shift' (Wells et al. 2022) to refer to the move of police-public contact online. Police organisations in the UK maintain that the public expect the online presence and functionality they are used to with other services. Yet, the potential effect of these changes on public confidence has not been fully explored.



Levels of trust and confidence in police in the UK have been declining and are lower in areas of deprivation and among minoritised groups. The public expect local policing to prioritise community safety and fair treatment by being present, visible, available, contactable, responsive, having good communication (including following-up), being respectful and empathetic, engaging and building relationships and trust (Bradford et al. 2024). In-person community engagement has been shown to be important in building confidence in sharing information on-line (Aston et al. 2021). Public consultation and engagement around the introduction of new technologies is important to transparency and public confidence, yet often this is limited. So, it is important to explore public perspectives on digital police contact.

What we did

We undertook four focus groups and four one-to-one interviews (when focus groups were not feasible) with a total of 29 individuals in our case study areas in England and Scotland in 2024. Focus groups took place in-person and lasted an average of 59 minutes (ranging from 46 to 72 minutes). Interviews were conducted online and lasted 39 minutes on average (ranging from 22 to 55 minutes). These findings are indicative and we do not make claims to generalisability.



Key findings

In-person versus digital presence: visibility, reassurance and safety

Participants had noticed a decrease in physical police presence, expressing that *'foot patrol's a thing of the past'*. Many felt that the only police presence they see is a police car responding to an emergency, and noted that local stations are closed. However, they acknowledged the danger of nostalgia, and argued that public expectations need to be realistic about what they can expect from the police. This suggests that a dialogue with the public about expectations would be beneficial to police in the long run.

The purpose of police presence was seen to be *'making the community feel safe'* by protecting and helping people. Being able to take action, not just being visible, was therefore important. Relatedly, there was also a feeling that digital solutions, including police-initiated communication (e.g. via social media) is not sufficient and cannot replace in-person police presence.

Participants felt that the public do not generally respond well to police putting out social media communications to tell people what they are doing: *'It doesn't contribute much at all'*. It was pointed out that online communication does not provide reassurance to older generations who do not use technology as it is invisible to them. However, participants also said that on-line communication can be reassuring, or at least *'probably better than silence'*, and they would be surprised if the police did not have that sort of online presence these days.

Digital contact, accessibility and clarity

Digital contact was seen as an alternative to long 101 (non-emergency number) call wait times. Participants described waiting 45 minutes to get through on 101, with some saying they had resorted to calling 999 as a result instead.

'...you won't get an immediate response, but at least if you log it online, ultimately, you should hear something'.

Participants noted slow follow-up responses to reports (e.g. a few days for an ASB call) as well as inadequate responses, including police not coming out in person at all. The lack of a timely response had in some cases resulted in evidence no longer being present. There was also an understanding of the reasons for wait times, given resourcing and pressures on the police as they are *'a catch all for everything'* and other services have been cut.

Digital channel confusion was also mentioned, for example one participant described holding on the phone and hearing a message to report via social media, and then having gone out of their way to create a social media profile being told they could not report that crime type via social media and they had to start again. Some participants thought 101 was a non-emergency number for various services, not just the police.



Participants were often apparently reluctant to use digital reporting. This was the case particularly in relation to reporting a crime via a ChatBot (live chat operated by Artificial Intelligence), but even in terms of live chat with a human operator or other online reporting. They cited problems with digital illiteracy (particularly for older generations), frustration and taking too long to type. Some also favoured speaking someone so they could have their say. But participants did think police should use online reporting, so long as it was user friendly, with clear guidance provided. The importance of clarity in digital communications (including information about the timeframe of a response) and acknowledgement of receipt (e.g. to an email or online report) was also emphasised. Participants felt the public should be given a choice about what system they would like to use to interact with police.

Communication and engagement

The importance of keeping those who have contacted the police updated about what is happening, and about the outcome, was consistently emphasised. Participants wanted police to get in touch with them when they raised issues, although there was some understanding that some matters may be too trivial for the police to respond to. One participant discussed text-based neighbourhood alerts from the police and how they could be simplified and improved in order to enable two-way communication.

Participants also described the importance of police engaging in-person with members of the local community, particularly young people, in order to ensure familiarity. They felt police need to work more closely with the community, and noted the loss of good community police who could work with young people and were '*there for the community*' long term.



Implications

- Given digital police presence does not inspire the same confidence or feelings of safety, consideration should be given to **prioritising in-person police presence** where possible, and having discussions with the public about realistic expectations.
- In order for digital crime reporting to be seen as a viable alternative to phone calls there should be **clear guidance** (e.g. if certain channels should be used for certain crime types), **acknowledgement of receipt** and ideally clear information about anticipated timeframes for a follow-up response.
- Communication is vital, including **keeping those who contact the police updated**.
- Consideration could be given to enabling two-way digital communication, for example by improving police use of text-based alerts.
- Given concerns around digital literacy and the fact that some people may prefer to speak to a person, the public should still be able to choose to access the police through traditional as well as digital routes.
- Local community engagement by police is vital to ensuring familiarity and building trust, and online should not replace in-person.



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