

Community policing
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Policing works best when it is done in conjunction with the community that is being served.

Confining police officers to patrol cars can give a superficial impression of presence but it is no substitute for real involvement in every neighbourhood.

There is also an onus on the public to engage with the police. People benefit from taking responsibility for their neighbourhoods and working alongside their local team of officers.

So community policing is not a passive process. It requires the police officers to have a real profile and the residents to be active participants.

The role of Community Support Officers should be seen in this context.

They are not - and should not become - substitutes for the regular police. They should not have the powers of fully-trained police officers. They should be dressed as part of the police family but their uniform should not convey the impression that they are regular police.

All of these restraints have persuaded some politicians and some police officers to be critical of PCSOs. I reject that criticism.

The public want the police to be highly visible and accessible.

Most complaints are about everyday, quality-of-life issues like vandalism, graffiti, litter and late-night noise. People want a police presence that shows an understanding of these concerns and a willingness to respond.

That does not require heavy-duty policing. Serious incidents need a serious response, but the attritional, day-to-day problems need a more patient and regular form of community policing.

Community beat teams work best when they consist of a mix of police officers and PCSOs allocated to a particular area.

They can engage on a daily basis with the main people in the community: headteachers, religious leaders, shop owners, youth workers - *and* those prone to yobbishness or criminality!

They should be woven into the fabric of the community: attending church fetes, speaking at local schools and writing for the neighbourhood newsletter.

They should be easy to approach and quick to respond.

The best police teams hold regular drop-in surgeries where people can raise concerns without having the intimidating inconvenience of going to the main police station.

These can be in imaginative locations, as well as the normal community centres. Asda in my constituency, for example, are sponsoring a mobile police unit outside their store.

The police team can respond to concerns by making home visits. They can reassure elderly or disabled people who are the least able to make their voices heard but often most fearful of crime. They can advise on home security measures.

The police should be encouraging and supporting Local Action Teams. The best communities have residents increasing awareness of crime prevention, running a neighbourhood watch scheme and raising money for new youth facilities. These people are not sitting back and waiting for the police to solve all of their woes: they are working with the police in partnership.

In turn, the police can support them, financially through their community budgets and by offering their expertise.

All of this activity also provides valuable intelligence on criminal activity within a community. A police team with their ears to the ground are best equipped to detect problems early and take preventative action.

Not all of this activity needs fully-trained police officers, who can sometimes be pulled away for emergencies. It needs a mix of regular police and PCSOs. It works well if the team also has an age, gender and racial balance.

That is the model for community policing. It is not always glamorous but it gets to the nub of what really concerns the public. Most importantly, it provides a visible, personal and effective response to the real problem of crime and anti-social behaviour.

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