

Policing Loyalist and Republican Communities: Understanding key issues for local communities and the PSNI

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The topic of policing, security and justice has dominated the social and political environment in Northern Ireland since the first paramilitary ceasefires in 1994. Within the context of Northern Ireland's history, one would be hard placed to think of a more emotive, controversial, and sensitive topic¹. It is an area that has divided opinion between Nationalist/Republican and Unionist/Loyalist communities for decades. However in recent years there have been a number of significant events that have impacted on policing including the signing of The Agreement in 1998², the publication of the Patten Report in 1999³, the devolution of powers to the Stormont Assembly in 1999⁴, the formation of the PSNI in 2001⁵, the final decommissioning of Republican weapons in 2005⁶, power sharing by Sinn Féin and the Democratic Unionist Party in 2007⁷, and Sinn Féin endorsing the policing and criminal justice structures in 2008⁸. These events have provided practical evidence of the distance Northern Ireland has travelled in the last decade. In the current political climate, debates are now dominated by the date for the devolution of policing and justice powers from Westminster to Stormont. This is viewed by large sections of the community as a key milestone that would provide further tangible evidence that Northern Ireland has progressed as a post-conflict society.

This paper is an opportunity to discuss the findings from research conducted by the Institute for Conflict Research 'Policing in Loyalist and Republican communities: understanding key issues for local communities and the PSNI'⁹ which was funded by the Joseph Rowntree Charitable Trust, and ran from August 2007 to June 2008. This research was primarily concerned with examining the central issues and concerns prevalent within Loyalist and Republican communities in relation to policing and criminal justice. It was set within a context where there had been a minimal amount of research into the

impact of policing within these communities. So much of the research around policing in the past had been set within a framework where paramilitary organisations have continued to influence the state governance and security policy. However, this research had an opportunity to examine issues that were unrelated to the conflict and focused instead on policing within a post-conflict environment, which was being steered under the distinct theme of 'policing with the community'. The idea of 'policing with the community' can be found within several of the 175 recommendations contained in the Patten Report. Recommendation forty-four states that 'Policing with the Community should be the core function of the police service and the core function of every police station'.¹⁰ Furthermore, it was hoped that these recommendations would fundamentally alter the relationship between the police and community and establish policing as a 'collective responsibility' with policing as a matter for the whole community, not something that the 'community leaves the police to do'.¹¹ A key element of the research was to determine how much of this idea was actually reality and practically being implemented and how much of it remained an idealistic vision?

The recommendations from the Patten Report provided both the police and local communities with an opportunity to build new relationships and address community issues and concerns within a multi-agency framework where the response was designed to fit the need. According to the PSNI:

*Community policing is proactive, solution-based and community driven. It occurs where the police and law-abiding citizens work to do four things: prevent crime, inter-agency problem solving, bring offenders to justice, and improve the overall quality of life.*¹²

The policy of 'policing with the community' has been a central element of policing practice since the establishment of the PSNI. However, it is unclear as to how the realities of community policing have impacted within Loyalist and Republican working class communities since Sinn Féin and the wider Republican community endorsed the policing structures and began practical engagement. A key aspect of the research was to examine the relationship between these communities and the police and determine whether the community policing that Patten envisaged was actually being delivered in a practical and meaningful manner.

The research involved a series of discussions through informal and formal interviews, focus groups and in-depth conversations with representatives from Nationalist/Republican communities, Unionist/Loyalist communities, District Policing Partnerships and Policing Board members, PSNI representatives, and

key informants. The discussions primarily took place with individuals from the Greater Belfast and Derry/Londonderry area. These areas were selected from the large number of Loyalist and Republican working class communities and the various community safety programmes that had been developed at the grass roots level within these areas. The following paper will briefly document the key themes that emerged from these discussions and conclude with an analysis of the central issues around policing that are impacting on local communities and the police themselves.

Nationalist/Republican views

The legacy of policing through the conflict remains a sensitive and emotive issue for large sections of the Nationalist/Republican community. The majority of Nationalists and Republicans had limited experiences of policing, which was usually confrontational. These communities were unable to identify with the policing and criminal justice system in a positive manner. However, there was an acknowledgement that in the ten years since the signing of The Agreement society both required and deserved a modern and professional police service. The role of existing community safety and restorative justice programmes in supporting communities since Sinn Féin's endorsement of the PSNI cannot be understated. They have played a significant part in providing leadership and advice at the grass roots level by encouraging people to use the police and, where appropriate, facilitating engagement between the community and police.

Issues and complaints around the police now appeared to focus on response times, the flow of information and a lack of visible policing. There was an expectation that the police would deliver and address all of the communities' concerns of community safety and criminality. However, the realities of policing are very different. There is a slow realisation within some quarters that the police cannot resolve all of the issues, that a partnership approach is required, and that the community are central to this. The difficulty facing both the PSNI and local communities is how this partnership approach will operate in practice and determining the boundaries between the community taking a responsibility for policing and the PSNI fulfilling their roles and responsibilities.

The decision from Sinn Féin to endorse the PSNI has been welcomed by the majority of the Republican community. However, a number of individuals have left Sinn Féin and been vocal in their criticism of the party. They hold the view that Sinn Féin has abandoned the principles of Republicanism and

provided a degree of legitimacy for the Northern Ireland state. Furthermore, there are a small minority who have become affiliated to dissident Republican paramilitary groups who continue to advocate a military approach to the British presence in Northern Ireland. They have also threatened Republicans who endorse the current Sinn Féin strategy and members of the PSNI.

Unionist/Loyalist views

There is a minimal amount of research that documents the perceptions of the Unionist/Loyalist communities towards the police and also their levels of engagement and participation in policing-led programmes and initiatives. From the discussions it became apparent that the legacy of the conflict had a significant impact on how these communities viewed the police. There was a fragmentation within Loyalist communities during the conflict with those supporting paramilitaries disengaging with the formal criminal justice system. Those that remained but did not support Loyalist paramilitaries were encouraged not to engage with the police or develop any meaningful forms of relationships.

One consequence was the movement of police officers away from the Loyalist working class communities. The knock-on effect was that these communities began to lose their affiliation and identity with the police, along with an argument that the police could not identify with the issues and concerns that were prevalent within working class communities as they did not reside within them. This, compounded with the policing of parades and the political changes, has led to a complete disengagement in some communities with the police.

Positive experiences of policing are at a minimum, and there is some suspicion from sections within Loyalism that the interests of their communities are being left behind in pursuit of the support and endorsement of the Republican communities for policing. There have been attempts to develop relationships and build positive partnerships, but these have come from the community and are largely built upon personalities and specific individuals. There does not appear to be a coherent strategy of engagement from the police in relation to building associations and links with Loyalist working class communities.

The lack of support at a political level for facilitating relationships between these communities and the police was also noticeable, especially when compared with the impact of Sinn Féin within Republican working class

communities. It is obvious that the existing mechanisms for building and sustaining links between the community and the police are not working, and the notion of 'community policing' has not resonated within Loyalist working class areas.

Police Officers' views

The police have undergone a number of structural, operational and, more importantly, organisational changes in the last decade. Considering their role throughout the conflict and the injuries and loss of life experienced by the police it has proved an emotive and sensitive period in their history. However, there was an acknowledgement that the police had to change and adapt to the new social and political climate evident within Northern Ireland. Post cease-fire policing is very different to policing during the conflict. There is a stronger emphasis on building and sustaining relationships and forging new partnerships with communities and different statutory agencies. However, there was also a realisation that this was to take place within the context of decreasing resources, increased community expectations, and continued threats and attacks from dissident Republicans and elements from within Loyalist communities.

It was apparent that the police recognised the need to develop positive working partnerships in the community. They understood the importance of the existing community-based initiatives and programmes and these appeared compatible with the workings of the formal criminal justice system. However, these partnerships were relatively new and still in their infancy. The boundaries between the communities' ownership of community safety programmes and initiatives and the role of the PSNI has yet to be established or more importantly tested. What is clear is that there is a realisation from the police that they alone do not hold the key to addressing criminality and anti-social behaviour. Instead a multi-agency approach with strong community participation is necessary for dealing with and responding to these incidents.

There was a degree of criticism of the District Policing Partnerships (DPPs) and the overall impact they had in supporting the police. There was some confusion around the role of DPPs and whether their emphasis was on consultation with communities, facilitation between communities and the police, or monitoring the police against their policing plans. Generally, the police welcomed the rationale for implementing DPPs but ultimately indicated that their true potential was being restricted because of public apathy towards them. It was noted that since Sinn Féin had taken their places on DPPs that

attendance at several public meetings had increased, but again their overall contribution to local policing issues had yet to be evaluated.

The new relationships with the Republican community were welcomed, although it was noted the potential impact this community would have on existing capacity and resources. The police often referred to the lack of resources and there was a hint of hesitancy from officers about meeting these communities' expectations while their own numbers continue to decrease. Discussions on the implementation and delivery of community policing received mixed responses. It became apparent that at a strategic level it was not receiving enough support or direction. Communities were keen for engagement and discussions to take place, but it appeared that organisationally community policing was often sacrificed for more measurable targets.

District Policing Partnerships

The District Policing Partnership (DPP) members, both independent and elected, highlighted the potential positive role that the partnerships could have in relation to developing relationships between the police and local communities. However, there was an acknowledgement that the majority of the general public were unsure of the roles and responsibilities of a DPP member. This was reflected in the poor attendance at the majority of public meetings. There had been recorded instances where no members of the public attended meetings.

Independent members noted that it was the responsibility of DPPs to essentially inform the public of their role, and facilitate engagement with the police. There was a degree of criticism from several members around the amount of engagement and interaction with communities that DPPs actually participated in. There were a number of examples of good practice mentioned but it became apparent that engagement and facilitating relationship building between the public and police was not viewed as a crucial element of the DPP by a number of members.

A further criticism of the DPP from the independent members centred on the attendance and contribution of a number of elected representatives of the partnerships. There was a general consensus that they were not supporting the process or contributing in a positive and meaningful manner. Questions were raised as to the role of the NIPB in managing and monitoring the roles of the DPP. There did not appear to be adequate monitoring of members' attendance at public and private meetings. Nor were there appropriate mechanisms in

place to assess the impact DPPs were having in both monitoring the PSNI at a local level, but more importantly facilitating relationships between the community and the police. Several members also questioned the willingness of the PSNI to engage with DPPs. A number of members had experiences where the police appeared not to be interested in the benefits of DPPs and viewed them as a hindrance and obstacle to policing.

Discussion

In analysing the research findings it became apparent that there were three key elements responsible for the successful implementation of the community policing programme. Republicans, Loyalists and the police had all undergone significant changes in recent years in adapting to a new social and political environment. The Republican community, Loyalist community and PSNI were the central figures during this new chapter for policing and justice in Northern Ireland. They have each viewed and internalised the policing reform process in very different ways. Furthermore, the process of reform and the subsequent impact has been extremely difficult for sections within each of these groups to take on board. However, although each of the groups approached the policing and justice debate very differently there appeared to be one underlying factor that was consistent within each of the groups, namely the legacy of the past. Memories, attitudes, perceptions and identities in relation to policing were governed very much by the Troubles, and as a result each group interpreted policing and what it represented very differently.

Areas of commonality

Regardless of their community background it was clear that Loyalist and Republican working class communities find it extremely difficult to associate and identify with policing. The PSNI and organisations such as DPPs were viewed as middle class institutions without the knowledge or understanding to comprehend the issues prevalent within working class communities. There was a strong suspicion that the police were isolated from the key concerns of these communities. It was no longer about the discrimination of Protestants or Catholics, and a police service for one community over another. The underlying issues were class based and concerned the delivery of a service that appeared to favour middle over working class. Communities were distinguishing not between the differences in policing the Falls and Shankill, but instead the differences in response times between a call out on the Malone Road and the Springfield Road.

There was a significant crisis in identity and this was being perpetuated by the low number of police officers emanating from staunchly Republican and Loyalist working class communities. There is a lack of representation within the PSNI from those within working class Republican and Loyalist communities. This has been illustrated through two recent news articles, with one noting that the PSNI had not recruited one person from the Loyalist Shankill Road area of Belfast in five years¹³, while the second stipulated that there had only been 28 new recruits from Republican dominated West Belfast in the last five years¹⁴. The issues facing the PSNI in Northern Ireland are not unlike those experienced by police officers in Glasgow, Liverpool and London where there are sections of the working class populations who have disengaged with the policing structures (Johnston et al, 2000). Therefore the PSNI in coming years may look to policing plans and initiatives in cities in England and Scotland to examine their impact at facilitating relationships and forging a link between working class disillusioned communities and the police.

Perceptions of policing

Initially communities had a degree of optimism around policing and the proposed benefits it would bring in relation to addressing criminality, anti-social behaviour and community safety issues. Throughout the conflict normal policing was but an aspiration, but since the conclusion of the Troubles there was a perception that the PSNI would finally have an opportunity to police without paramilitary threats and intimidation. However, recently there has been growing discontent with aspects of policing, with specific attention focusing on response times, attitudes of officers, the flow of information and the following up of call-outs. The realities of policing are not what the communities envisaged. However, the PSNI contend that they are delivering a fair and positive service whilst contending with a continued dissident threat and increased budget constraints.

Furthermore, there has been some degree of criticism from the local communities around the concept of community policing. To a certain extent there appears to be a lack of knowledge from the community as to the aims and objectives of community policing. Essentially, they don't understand the rationale behind its implementation, how its success is measured, or the benefits to their communities. This view reflects the work of previous theorists¹⁵ who contend that within the context of effective community policing it requires an understanding of the different communities expectations and values towards police practice. According to local

communities the PSNI are not delivering on the expectations set down by the community, which may explain the apparent lack of support for the idea of community policing.

Public Prosecution Service

Both Loyalist and Republican communities were united in their criticism of the Public Prosecution Service (PPS). Their main concerns centred on the lack of knowledge about the organisation and whom it was accountable to. It was interesting to note that for many the PPS and the PSNI were viewed as the same organisations. Therefore if decisions went against the community that were the responsibility of the PPS, then the PSNI were more than likely to receive the criticism. There has been other independent criticism of the PPS and the manner in which it engages with the public. The recent inspection of the PPS for Northern Ireland¹⁶ concluded that there was a need to develop a more productive working relationship with the other criminal justice partners. Furthermore, it was noted that cases were taking too long to progress through the system, and that there were issues around the publishing of case outcomes and providing more comprehensive explanations to victims of the reasons why decisions are taken not to prosecute.

In this new dispensation of policing, encouraging the community to both participate in and actively engage in the sharing of information is crucial if the PSNI are to fulfil their roles and responsibilities. However, the current inconsistencies surrounding prosecutions and sentencing along with the distinct lack of explanations on the decision-making process has the potential to damage both the image of the PSNI and the wider criminal justice system.

Summary

The research has thrown together a number of interesting findings that offer an analysis of the central issues facing the delivery of a positive policing service. The question being asked is whether in a post-conflict society such as Northern Ireland there is more of an opportunity to engage with and develop positive working partnerships with a community that has never worked with the formal criminal justice system, as opposed to a community that historically had a strong association with the agencies of law and order but has seen a recent deterioration in the relationship? The research suggests that neither Loyalists nor Republicans have a strong affiliation or identity with the policing structures. If anything there is more expectancy from the Republican

community, however there is a danger that if these expectations are not met, then the community's confidence, trust and respect for the organisation will begin to diminish. Within Loyalism there appear to be fewer strategic structures in place to support the communities in embracing the recent reforms to policing. Interestingly, any form of discussion is being generated at the grass roots level. Individuals from within these communities in the absence of political leadership are interacting with the policing structures, debating community concerns and attempting to facilitate further conversations which encompass larger sections of their community.

Class appears to be a growing factor in relation to policing. Historically, policing was assessed along Protestant and Catholic lines of demarcation. Complaints surrounded discrimination on a basis of community background, and the organisation was constantly attempting to offer a position of neutrality. The Patten recommendations have gone some way to address these issues with 50:50 recruitment and the development of measures of accountability and transparency. However, to some extent programmes and initiatives continue to be viewed along the lines of community background. NIPB surveys continue to measure views and perceptions of policing and criminal justice on the basis of religion and community background. It is extremely difficult if not impossible to extrapolate the class of respondents, which as the findings from the research indicate, is more important in relation to PSNI engagement than whether you are a Unionist/Loyalist or Nationalist/Republican. Until the criminal justice system at a strategic level begins to think outside the box and redefines the context of policing in Northern Ireland through class and not just community background, then we will not have a police service that has the ability to develop sustainable working partnerships with all areas of society.

On a final note, it is important to recognise where we all have come in the last decade. Even the most optimistic of individuals would be hard pressed to admit to forecasting the significant changes Northern Ireland has gone through since the paramilitary ceasefires in 1994. Policing was always viewed as one of the most significant obstacles to the conclusion of a violent conflict. Decisions around the implementation of a police service recognised and endorsed by the entire community have proved sensitive and emotional. Each of the main protagonists has had to make courageous sacrifices, faced internal criticisms and altered their own objectives so that society can move on.

For more information on the research and a full copy of the final report contact the Institute for Conflict Research, www.conflictresearch.org.uk.

Notes

- 1 Mulcahy, 2006
- 2 The Agreement, 1998
- 3 The Patten Report, 1999
- 4 <http://www.bbc.co.uk/ni>
- 5 <http://www.psni.police.uk>
- 6 IMC Report, 2005
- 7 <http://www.niassembly.gov.uk/>
- 8 Belfast Telegraph, 29/01/07
- 9 Byrne and Monaghan, 2008
- 10 The Patten Report, 1999
- 11 Smyth, 2002
- 12 PSNI, 2002
- 13 Newsletter, 11/04/08
- 14 Andersonstown News, 28/06/08
- 15 Kelling and Wilson, 1982
- 16 CJNI, 2007

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