

Devon & Cornwall Police Authority Community Engagement Committee

02 April 2008

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Report of the Chief Executive

Police Authority Panels

Recommendation

That 2 panels should be set up and run twice a year

Introduction

1. This report provides an overview of the pilot panel and outlines the costs of running future police authority panels.
2. Following discussions with the Community Engagement Committee the following paragraphs provide an overview of the model for setting up and running panels in Devon and Cornwall and the benefits of using a panel process.

Background Information: Pilot Panel

3. A pilot panel was run in order to examine the effectiveness of this method of consultation. A total of 500 invitations were distributed across 5 areas (Torridge, West Devon, Plymouth, North Cornwall and Caradon), 30 individuals responded, and 11 were selected representing each area. The main topic of discussion for the meeting was the Local Policing Summary and a copy was sent to each member. An independent facilitator ran the meeting with 2 police authority officers present to provide information about the authority and answer any questions. Other topics discussed during the meeting were the current level of knowledge about the police authority, local policing issues and the concept of the panel. A report providing the preliminary results of the initial panel meeting is attached.

Cost of Setting up and Running a Panel

4. The financial cost of running a panel is estimated at £750, which includes recruitment and running costs. This figure is based on all postage costs from sending out initial invitations to maintaining contact with selected panel members, the rental of the venue (room hire and lunch), travel costs for panel members, and an independent facilitator (who ran the session and did an initial assessment).

Proposed Model

5. It is proposed that 2 panels of 11 to 12 people will be created. Members of the public from Plymouth will be randomly allocated to both. The recruitment process used for the pilot panel will be replicated for these two panels. A rolling membership for the panels will occur in order to ensure a broad range of perspectives are taken into account and address any suggestions of manipulation by officers of the Police Authority on viewpoints of the panel members.
6. The members of the current panel set up for the pilot study will be incorporated into the 2 panels according to the area they reside in.
7. The panels will meet twice a year and discussions will relate primarily to the 2 consultation priorities agreed in the previous committee meeting. However, the frequency of meetings can be reviewed at a later date.
8. Following each meeting, a summary report on the topics discussed and conclusions made by panel members will be disseminated to ensure accuracy of data. This will then be presented at committee meetings for further action.

Benefits for Running a Panel

9. It was agreed by members of the pilot panel that this type of face-to-face consultation was the most successful way to engage with the public.
10. Panel members outlined the positive benefits, which included a better understanding of the police authority, enhanced customer service approach, and a more positive outlook on how their involvement is important and influential.

Contact for Further Information

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Panel Meeting Results

The following is a short summary of the preliminary results of the pilot panel meeting held in Launceston.

Policing Summary

Clarity (C)

Panel members felt that the summary was written in a language that could not be understood by “normal householders”/ the public. It needs to use “plain english” in order for the Police to get their message across and improve their communication to the public. If the summary was an “easy read” then the public would be more likely to read it. From this it was felt that the role and relationship of the Authority to the Force was not clearly defined or explained. The members of the panel felt that the summary did not deliver a clear, direct message to the public. They were especially confused with the meaning behind the statistics presented on the second page. What they suggested was having less statistics and more explanation behind the meaning of what they presented.

Explanation needed (E)

Following on from the clarity of the document, panel members highlighted certain areas that needed further explanation. One such area included the statistics presented on the second page. Although it captures all the set targets for the Force, individuals felt unsure of the meaning behind the percentages. In addition, more information regarding the role of the Authority and its relationship with the Force was needed. In relation to this, panel members felt that they needed a clearer insight into how policing operates in terms the working relationships and influences of and between the Authority, Government and Force. Finally, the last area brought up by panel members included the publication of opening times for police stations, while most of the summaries publish them, some did not, for example Holsworthy (Torridge) and Tregony (Mid Cornwall).

Layout (L)

The layout was considered important as this influenced how the information was received by members of the public, from the front page that should initially grab the public’s attention to the last page with key contact information the public should be aware of. The majority felt that although the Authority owned this publication, the contact number that the public comes across first would be the one they would use, despite it being publicised as the number for the Authority and should not be used to report a crime. The panel members stated that the public would not be able to distinguish between the Police Authority number, which is a local number (thus the call charge is known), and the 08452 which is an unrecognisable number (call charges publicly unfamiliar), and if presented with both numbers, the initial choice would be the Authority’s number.

Readability (R)

In relation to the clarity and level of explanation of the summary, another area that needed to be looked at was the way the summary was written and whether the public completely understood the information that was presented to them. The panel members were adamant that the summary needed to be written and presented in a style they understood using terminology that all householders would comprehend. If this was achieved panel members believed that more householders would be more likely to read the document.

Informative (I)

There was a general agreement that the policing summary was initially a good idea, and with some alterations and additions it could prove to be a very useful document. Currently, panel members felt that it was informative about all the different wards within their area. All members agreed that the summary was in fact local enough and more detail about policing in their local area was not needed. Overall, the summary was well received and was seen in a positive light by the panel members.

Policing in General

Visibility (V)

Visibility was an important issue that was raised by the panel, as many highlighted the fact that they do not see police on the streets in their local area. It was also mentioned that the previous chief constable had promised to put more police on the streets and failed to deliver on this. On a similar note, the timing of shifts was raised as in one area PCSOs finish their shift at 10pm, however a lot of problems begin at 10.30pm and there are not enough police officers to deal with the situation. During peak problem periods, there appears to be insufficient policing resources available thus creating a strong public perception that there are not enough police officers on the streets.

Communication (C)

Panel members believed that there was a communication gap between the Force and the public, as many of them were unaware of the frequency and type of meetings that occurred in their local community. It was felt that more information needed to be disseminated to the public through a variety of methods, and it was suggested that this should be through advertisements in local shops, supermarkets, pharmacists and local notice boards. If possible there should be leaflets and/or business cards with the local police station numbers on them put through each household.

Forms of Communication (F)

The way the Force interacted with the public influenced how effective their communicative skills were perceived. It is clear from those who visited the Constabulary website that it was not an easy website to navigate and there was no clear links to other agencies which is essential (as it shows that the Force is working in partnership with others). Those members who were aware of the non-emergency number felt that the call charges associated with it is not clearly defined by the Force, and ultimately should be free of charge. Overall though, face-to-face interaction was perceived to be a more effective way of communicating to the public rather than through technology (e.g. websites) or paperwork (e.g. leaflets).

Content of Communication (C)

Although, the type of communication used to inform the public is important, the content of this communication is equally, if not more, significant to getting key messages to the public across. In order to make an informed opinion about the effectiveness of the overall tri-partite system the public needs to be updated with relevant information that would affect communities at a local and regional level. Such information includes the budget of the Force and how this is distributed across the various services it provides to the public and the decisions behind this.

Interaction with the Public (I)

The level of interaction between the police and the public appeared to be of a minimal amount, especially when the stations close during inappropriate times of the day (e.g. lunchtime and evenings). As highlighted previously, face-to-face interaction was a preferred method of contact as some members mentioned that they used to know their local police officers very well, however this is not the case right now. It was mentioned that in larger populated cities police officers were seen on bicycles and that caused them to interact more with the public in comparison to those who were seen in vehicles. A suggestion put across was that Devon and Cornwall adopt a similar scheme, increasing the level of interaction between the Force and public. On a separate note, the work the police carry out in schools have had a positive effect and it was felt that it should continue.

Workload (W)

It was recognised and agreed that the Police and the Crown Prosecution Service are restricted in their capabilities due to various targets set by the Government that organisations are required to meet. These targets coupled with the limited resources and finances these organisations have increases the pressure to perform at a high level. Once this was highlighted to the members of the panel, they understood and felt sympathetic towards the system under which the Police operate. However, without sufficient information being disseminated to the public regarding this they would not have been able to understand this.

Public Participation (P)

It was recognised that at times the public need to get more involved in their local community in terms of attending to certain problems. However, in some communities members of the public are fearful of taking part and dealing with community issues and would prefer the police to handle these situations.

Police Authority

Lack of Information (L)

Before attending this panel meeting and receiving all the information prior to attendance, the majority of the members were unaware of the existence of the Police Authority. The information provided in the summary did not clearly deliver the purpose and role of the Authority, thus more clear cut messages about who the Authority are, why they exist and what they do needs to be disseminated to the public. As the public do not have sufficient information regarding the Authority they are unable to make an informed opinion about them as an organisation. The level of influence an Authority has over policing issues and how much of that is taken from public feedback seemed to be the kinds of issues that the public would be interested in as it could affect their level of involvement with activities such as these.

Panel

Structure (S)

Although the panel was in agreement regarding the continuation of this type of consultation, it was suggested that these meetings should have some sort of structure to them in order to maximise the output generated from them. A list of topics to be discussed at each meeting should be presented to members and a set of actions should be agreed at the end of each meeting. In addition, it was suggested that every police station should have a police authority "query box" for members of the public

and the members should bring these questions to each panel meeting and this could inform part of the structure for the panel meeting.

Alterations (A)

As the panel membership would change yearly, the members suggested that the new individuals should be gradually filtered through. Instead of changing the membership at one given time, it was suggested that new members should be gradually introduced and settled into the panel over the course of the year, allowing them to draw upon the knowledge of the experienced panel members limiting any unnecessary repeated discussions. In addition, a wider age range is needed for the panels, in order to achieve a broad range of responses and capturing the opinions of all ages.

Other Informative Methods (I)

As mentioned before, it was suggested that police stations should have “query boxes” for the members of the public to place any questions they had about the police authority or policing in general. This would be an additional method of consultation and would provide local members of the public with an added way of providing feedback to the Police. It was also pointed out that another approach to receiving feedback from the community would come from parish council meetings. A member of the panel suggested that other panel members should attend their parish council meetings and feedback important issues to the next panel meeting.

Yes, (unanimous) panels should continue