

Criminal Justice Alliance: Members' Meeting

Tuesday 13 October 2015, 17 Oval Way, London SE11 5RR

MEETING NOTE

Guest speaker: Sara Thornton, Chair of the National Police Chiefs' Council

Sara began her presentation by describing some of the challenges facing the modern police force, significant among them being the number incidents involving mental health problems. Twenty per cent of incidents where the police are involved have a mental health aspect, an 11 per cent increase over the last four years. Sara also cited the large amount of resources being directed towards missing persons cases (many of which concern people from institutions) and reports of child sexual exploitation.

Add to these issues the terrorist threat of cult-like organisations like Isis, or Daesh, and it becomes clear that there needs to be a shift in our assessment of what constitutes 'police issues'.

While cases involving mental health aspects or child sexual exploitation (CSE) might appear to worlds apart from the war on terrorism, Sara made it clear that all they are linked in their danger to vulnerable people. It's the equal and connected duty of the police to act as 'society's safety net' as it is to counter the threat posed by terrorists.

Sara also raised the issue of budget cuts to police resources. While the overall Government grant for policing was cut by 25 per cent during the last parliament, the differing size of local budgets has created a disproportionate effect across different police forces - urban areas are the worst affected. The police are preparing for further cuts during this parliament - Sara forecast the loss of 30,000 jobs by 2020.

Sara moved on to provide an overview of the purpose and function of the NPCC. She identified local police forces as one of the great strengths of policing in England. However there are many areas where police forces could learn from each other, something the NPCC strives to improve by encouraging cooperation between police forces. The NPCC also recognises the untapped potential of joining-up services across the public sector in order to reduce demand on public services and focus on preventative work.

Sara cited the progress made in the Midlands (Warwickshire and West Mercia) as an excellent example of a 'bottom-up' approach to greater collaboration across public services. A more integrated, streamlined system should lead to less duplication.

Finally, Sara discussed the need for a more efficient and effective police with a foundation of a professional ethos and evidence-led policies. If these changes are made then, despite more cuts, the police can continue to offer the same level of protection to the public - but it will need to do so in a different way.

Questions & Answers:

Rod Clarke, PET: Given the reduced proportion of callouts that would normally be labelled as genuine policing issues, is there the possibility that this continual professionalisation of the police will simply over-resource police officers when they could just turn to other sources? Is there a strategy in which you could target the professional expert and use different sorts of resources in these cases?

Answer: Yes. But it isn't so much that the issues don't concern the police, it's that they often aren't concerned with crime. That said, there's no doubt that high-end enforcement resources should be reserved for more intrusive cases while the majority of cases will only require 'low touch'.

The difficulty is that there is an argument that the 'high-end' work will only be legitimate if all the work at the other end of the spectrum is covered. But the police shouldn't have to do everything in order to retain political support and remain legitimate – however, the reality is that it is very difficult to refuse help.

Nathan Roberts, A Band of Brothers: In your opinion, why has the crime rate fallen?

Answer: There are a huge number of factors. Chief among them would be the change in the way we now settle disputes and the fact that, due to the prevalence of social media, young people are now much less likely to be outside and therefore in the traditional spaces where crime used to be more prevalent.

Other factors include a more effective, join-up approach by the police and a society that is more compliant, surveilled and regulated.

Rebecca Roberts, CCJS: Cuts to the police budget are an opportunity to reduce the criminal justice system as a whole and shift the work to bigger state actors - how will the police shift this responsibility?

Answer: The question is really whether we want to shrink together or shrink apart. It will take some brave thinking but it needs to be the former. The key will be to think about the overall state outcomes that need to be achieved and work back from there. If we start with the institution and try to move forward from there without thinking about the outcomes then we will keep doing it the same way with no real progress.

Debra Clothier, Escaping Victimhood: It shouldn't be underestimated how important it is for victims to feel acknowledged by the criminal justice system, especially when it is recognised as being necessary for their recovery. Something as simple as a police officer answering a callout is part of this acknowledgement. While we can appreciate that the nature of policing is changing, is there the possibility that this type of acknowledgement might be underestimated?

Answer: That might be right but I think it's important to ask whether that is in fact true for every victim? We always need to ask if there is evidence behind our assertions.

But there is undoubtedly a bit of a dilemma between the importance of supporting victims and recognising that the criminal justice system is not a one-way street - it has to be fair, consider allegations carefully and test the evidence before it.

Leslie Alfin, Practivate Ltd: You've talked about how the definitions of crime are changing and that there is a connection between the rise in terrorism offences and the vulnerability of young people online. If our rapidly developing technology is driving some of these changes and police are having to respond, what types of solutions are being discussed?

Answer: Those discussions definitely need to take place but the police are already stepping up. The problem with technology is that it is so ubiquitous that there's rarely a case that doesn't involve it in some way. The way we communicate has changed so dramatically that evidence nearly always has a digital element.

Liz Brown, Circles UK: How do the police feel about the shift to a more collaborative, sensitive style of policing?

Answer: While the traditional police response might have been something like 'that's dangerous - we'd better deal with it' we now know that's a nonsense because of examples like Circles where you have volunteers working with sex offenders.

An example from Thames Valley Police - we decided to share some space in the library to run an information service. But, of course, the whole idea of an integrated service didn't work because the police desk had to be set up in a different room because the library staff were afraid about safety issues with sex offenders in the library. This 'othering' that goes on about offenders just doesn't match with the fact that offenders are people too and may well have been in the library in the first place.

Leo Bertels, NatCen: What are some examples of the type of collaborative work that you've been referring to?

Answer: The work with Circles is a good example so you don't just rely on MAPPA arrangements. The work around trying to mentor and support troubled families has worked really well as has some of the early intervention work. The evidence base around multiple interventions for families and communities that have multiple needs is pretty well proved and join-up services are a good way to tackle this.

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