

Response from Highgate (Camden) Safer Neighbourhoods Panel to MOPAC

Summary

This paper is the response from the Highgate (Camden) Safer Neighbourhoods Panel to the proposals set out in the Consultation Draft of the MOPAC Police and Crime Plan 2013-2017. This section summarises the points which are elaborated below.

We do understand that some cuts are needed, and that some changes could be beneficial. The extent of the cuts needed - £500m out of a budget of £3.6bn – is about 14%, so the reason for a target of 20% is not clear.

We do have serious concerns about the planned changes, in particular the fact that the core ethos of Safer Neighbourhoods is being set aside in favour of a more centralised model. Neighbourhoods are very local – the Highgate Ward Panel contains representatives from at least 12 recognisably distinct neighbourhoods. The current model of a ward-based team interacting with a ward-based panel has had notable successes which would not have been achieved by a team operating on a less localised basis. This benefit was also emphasised in the MPA Safer Neighbourhoods Scoping Study published in 2010, which has been ignored in this Plan.

Yet the Local Police Areas which are proposed as the basis of the new model are, presumably, units comprising 5-10 wards, with 2 or 3 LPAs per Borough. This is not a model for neighbourhood policing, nor for effective community involvement, and will destroy the gains of the last 6-7 years.

A key responsibility of ward Panels has been setting local policing priorities. It is proposed that this function will be centralised to the Safer Neighbourhood Board, which (whatever its composition) will be unable to carry out this vital function effectively.

In addition to the abandonment of real community policing, our concerns about the draft Plan are:

- Implementation: it is dismantling a successful model, with undue haste and before the replacement structure has been properly defined and proven
- Community contact: the proposed model will lose the community contact, visibility and respect which have been the roots of its success
- Public access: interaction between police and the public has to change, but the proposals in the plan are vague, untested and half-baked.

The 'local' model proposed, in fact, does not merit the title Safer Neighbourhoods.

Key successes of Safer Neighbourhoods

In Highgate Ward, Safer Neighbourhoods has achieved some notable successes:

- A huge reduction in drug and other crime and antisocial behaviour arising from local schools
- Significant reductions in ASB in other neighbourhoods within the ward
- Improved surveillance and crime reduction in a 'difficult' estate
- Reduction in burglary, partly due increased awareness in the community
- Improved visibility and recognition of police across the ward
- Improved community engagement, reflecting neighbourhood needs in policing priorities
- Close cooperation with local authority agencies and with neighbouring police teams (Islington, Haringey and Hampstead Heath)

These have all required close and continuing engagement between police and community at ward and neighbourhood levels, which Safer Neighbourhoods has, crucially, delivered.

Where there have been failures in the service, they have largely been due to a period of absent or inadequate team leadership, high turnover in the team, or lack of experience.

Comments on the MOPAC Proposals

1. *The proposed 'Safer Neighbourhoods' model*

There is no evidence of a proper analysis of the key success factors in neighbourhood policing. It seems to be assumed that the role of the ward panels has only been to 'set priorities' – a role planned to be undertaken on a Borough-wide basis by the proposed Safer Neighbourhood Board. In fact, setting priorities – in consultation with the ward SN team – has been an essential part of the panels' activity, but not the only one. The panel has been the eyes and ears of the team – providing information and contact from the community, raising issues before they escalate to reported crimes, and gathering feedback from the community on the effectiveness of the team's work.

A Local Police Area, as defined (managed at Inspector level) will presumably have to cover 5-10 wards, comprising a third to a half of the whole Borough per LPA. Staffing dedicated to the ward is minimal and the role of the 'named' – not dedicated – sergeant with respect to the ward is undefined. This is insufficient to provide continuity, local knowledge or community interaction across the neighbourhoods in the ward.

In 2010 the MPA published a Safer Neighbourhoods Scoping Study in which the benefits of the neighbourhood policing model were clearly brought out. This important study involved interviews with participants from four representative London Boroughs. It is not referred to in the MOPAC Plan, and the lessons from it have been ignored. The consequence of this is a Plan based on a seriously flawed analysis.

The Safer Neighbourhood Board for the Borough is proposed to take over some key panel functions, but is completely undefined. We have some fundamental questions about it. How is it to be appointed? Who can participate? How does it gather its information, and how does it reach decisions? At what level of locality – Borough, ward or neighbourhood – will it set policing priorities? What role, if any, remains for the ward panels? Crucially, how can the Board represent the diverse needs of the several hundred – maybe thousand – identifiable, distinct neighbourhoods comprising Camden? These are basic concerns as yet unaddressed. Our concern is that the role of the community in this process will not just diminish, but will disappear entirely.

2. *Implementation*

It has been stated that the changes proposed will be in place by April 2013. If so, this is an alarming, even reckless, degree of haste. There is clearly very little time, if any, allowed for digesting the results of public consultation and for adjusting the model as necessary; and virtually no time for redeploying, relocating and retraining officers for their new roles in a significantly changed structure.

There is no plan for introducing the changes in a phased manner, or for piloting the changes before implementing across London. This hasty process is unnecessarily risky and is not driven by community need.

3. *Community contact*

It appears that the desire to redeploy officers from ward based teams into larger, more centralised 'cluster' teams is driven, not by any reduction in overall numbers but by a belief that the result will be more manageable or more economical. In fact, by weakening contact between police and community, it is likely to result in a less known, less well informed and less trusted police team than the current Safer Neighbourhood model.

There are several reasons for this. Much information comes directly from public to officers; however members of the public will share information with a known, trusted officer but not necessarily with anyone in uniform who happens to be on patrol. Officers can share intelligence, but not to the extent that can replace frequent presence and contact with particular neighbourhoods, and indeed with their problem individuals and families. Continuity works both ways – better informed officers and greater public confidence. Direct public contact can ensure a flexible and timely response to short-term problems.

4. Public access

The need to dispose of (or redeploy) expensive and underused premises is understandable. However, it appears again that a properly thought-out strategy for public access is absent, and is being sacrificed to the drive for short-term cost reduction. Proposals for public access, both in the draft Plan and as put forward in public meetings, are astonishingly vague and inconsistent: supermarkets are in the Plan but denied at public meeting; provision for witness and victim protection at public access sites is undefined; the only 24 hour access in Camden is planned to be more than an hour's travel from many of the northern parts of the Borough.

With the current Safer Neighbourhoods team, this ward has been able to hold frequent 'surgeries' where members of the public can approach the team informally with any problem or issue that concerns them. Although attendance is variable and unpredictable, these surgeries do provide an important channel of communication, which will be less effective (if they happen at all) with a less localised team.

The efficacy of other means of contact, such as online or via social networks, has not been researched adequately in terms of reliability, safety or confidentiality, yet there is a clear assumption in the Plan that these will turn out to be viable solutions. Again, it appears that implementation is running well ahead of establishing the feasibility or effectiveness of the planned solutions – an unacceptably risky approach to a vital service.

Finally, in view of the possible locations for public access that have been aired by MOPAC and in the press, we should point out that Highgate ward does not have either a supermarket or a post office.

Recommendations

We recommend that MOPAC takes note of these concerns, and in particular

- properly researches the key success factors of the ward-based Safer Neighbourhoods model and ensures that these are not lost in reorganisation
- ensures that an adequate ward-based team and panel remain in place and have at least some significant role in prioritising local policing activity
- takes care not to implement major management changes without adequate preparation, training and trialling
- properly prioritises consultation and community contact, and includes in its plans provision for regular contact down to individual neighbourhoods
- devises an adequate and properly researched plan for safe and accessible public access to police services, with proper testing and assessment before implementation across London.

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