Communication

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Effective communication shapes service delivery towards the needs of the public. The various ways in which police communicate should be proportionate to the needs and requirements of the different communities they serve.

Communication is broader than face-to-face interactions. It includes making information available about what the police do and how they do it.

Technology provides various communication and engagement opportunities through open data sources and social media platforms.

Communication involves interacting with communities, listening to their views and ideas, and acting upon them in a way that improves police performance and service delivery.

The police may communicate using open data, digital and social media platforms or via face-to-face interactions. Engagement with media organisations is addressed in a dedicated section on **media relations**. The various ways in which the police communicate should be proportionate to the needs and requirements of the different communities served.

Open data

Open data allows information (data) produced by public bodies to be freely available to the public. For the purpose of this guidance, data is non-personal information held by or on behalf of a public body. This is usually in electronic format, but it can cover physical formats as well.

This openness allows members of the public to hold public sector bodies to account (for example, by seeing all expenditure made by a public body).

It also allows data from different sources to be put together in applications (for example, mixing property price and crime data on a map) and makes sharing data between public sector partners more efficient. Applications – often referred to as ‘mash ups’ – can take the format of websites, mobile phone applications, or reports and papers.

Definition

The concept of open data is not new. Although the term is currently in frequent use, there are no commonly agreed definitions.

For this guidance, the following have been used.

- Open data is data that can be freely used, reused and redistributed by anyone.
- It does not include private data such as individual’s names.
- In relation to public services, open data means data available under the terms of the Open Government Licence.
- The presumption is that data about public services will be open data, although there are some exceptions to this on confidentiality and security grounds. It may be that some data held in relation to public services is made available, but is charged for.

Open Government Licence

The Open Government Licence is a simple set of terms and conditions that allow the free reuse of government and public sector information. For organisations that are not public bodies, there is the Creative Commons by Attribution or other recognised open licence.

For further information see **Open Government Licence** information from The National Archives.

Principles

Open data is a key government commitment.

The prime minister has stated his desire to ‘use digital technology to open up data with the aim of providing every citizen in Britain with true ownership and accountability over the services they demand from government’.

The government is committed to making public data openly available by publishing an online inventory of all non-personal data held by public sector bodies, to make the public more aware of what public bodies do and how they work.

Communication is one of the key Joint Emergency Service Interoperability Principles. More information can be found at **JESIP**.

For further information see **data.gov.uk**.

Restrictions

There are, however, several issues that can restrict access to open data, whether intentional or accidental.

Common complaints over access to public data include:

- information that is held in websites or databases to which only registered members have access
- proprietary technologies used to store or present data that create barriers to access
- the use of formats such as Adobe PDF that make it hard to extract data for reuse
- data that is not updated frequently enough to be of use
- data that is described poorly, or is grouped in such a way as to make reuse difficult

For further information see APP on **information management**.

Uses

Transparency

Open data specifically encourages or requires public bodies to proactively make information and data available to the public, with the aim of creating a more transparent government, in which citizens actively participate and collaborate.

Efficiency

The availability of data to public sector bodies encourages comparisons with similar bodies, allows benchmarking of services and better decision making. It can also reduce demands for information, for example, under freedom of information legislation.

For further information see **How to make a freedom of information request**.

Co-production and partnership

Co-production and partnership is where public bodies and communities jointly agree on the need for, and deliver, services to government. The release of data allows commercial and other potential partners to gain a better understanding of the issues facing public bodies, enabling them to propose solutions to those issues.

Sources

The Local Public Data Panel was created to champion the release of local public data (including that held by the police) and to promote information sharing. It also seeks to agree common standards for data released into the public sphere, and to make local public services better understood and more accessible. The panel consists of leading practitioners from the public sector. This was part of a digital community services campaign project run by **Nesta** (the National Endowment for Science, Technology and the Arts).

Data.gov.uk provides access to over 9,000 public data sets. For further information about Local Public Data Panels see **making local councils more transparent and accountable to local people**.

Office for National Statistics

The Office for National Statistics (ONS) is also working to open up access to over two billion data items at the local neighbourhood level.

For further information see **Office for National Statistics**.

Examples of practical use

Availability and transparency of open data includes the following.

- **Police.uk** shows local crime data for the public to use when attending beat meetings, and to hold their local force to account. The intention is to include further information on justice outcomes shortly.
- Source data from research has been made available (for example, data from NHS clinical studies and demographic statistics, such as the number of people in a particular benefits programme).

- The Department for Transport and the transport industry have shared the data of all 350,000 bus stops, railway stations and airports in Britain (see National Public Transport Access Nodes (NaPTAN) at **data.gov.uk**).
- Mapping and other information from the **Ordnance Survey** was released on 1 April 2010.
- In London, data has been released about road traffic incidents. Information on incidents involving cyclists was extracted from this, and placed on maps to show cyclists safer routes.
- Financial data has been released showing all expenditure above a certain level by public bodies.
- Expenditure on hospitality by senior officers is commonly available.
- Salary details by job role have been released for public use, for example.

Face-to-face communication

Positive face-to-face interaction can promote trust and understanding between the public and police. It can also help to create opportunities to increase public participation in policing strategies. If managed correctly, this can improve service delivery and increase confidence.

Face-to-face engagement should be managed in a way that is proportionate to the needs and requirements of different communities. The engagement needs of one group may not reflect the needs of others. A detailed understanding of community needs and concerns should influence the approach taken towards engaging with particular community groups.

Public meetings

The purpose of public meetings must be established by understanding who the police intend to engage with through this medium. The format of the meeting should be adapted to maximise the benefits for all. Some meetings provide opportunities to present information to the public and promote reassurance, while others may provide opportunities to involve the public in problem-solving initiatives.

Meeting objectives

Those carrying out engagement should ensure that the objectives of public meetings are met. Training can provide officers with presentation skills or skills that help in supporting collaborative or public-led problem-solving exercises.

Resources

Public meetings should be allocated appropriate resources. Where meetings have a low turnout, do not reach a particular sector of the community or repeatedly identify the same issues, it is important to consider whether resources may be channelled towards a more effective and representative way of achieving the particular objective of this engagement.

Location

A static format for meetings, where they are repeatedly held in locations such as community centres, may not always be the most appropriate forum to reach a particular sector of the community. It may be necessary to hold meetings where particular community members already congregate (such as supermarkets, places of worship, local clubs or interest groups).

Examples of public meetings

Traditionally, neighbourhood policing teams and their partners have set priorities through the Partners and Communities Together (PACT) process.

This involves engaging with and consulting people from the local community to ascertain their concerns. Issues and concerns can be raised through:

- meetings and surgeries
- street meetings
- postcards
- face-to-face surgeries
- environmental visual audits (EVAs)

These concerns are then discussed with local residents and partners at a regular meeting to agree what the priorities are for the area and how they will be tackled.

This meeting is generally where final decisions are made on the priorities the partnership should tackle. It is also a means of ensuring that local priorities reflect the concerns of individuals and the wider community not attending the meeting. There should be various means of consultation in order to ensure that the issues most affecting local people are identified and considered.

Beat meetings

Section 34 of the Police Reform and Social Responsibility Act 2011 mandates a requirement for regular beat meetings to be held between police officers and members of the public within each neighbourhood. Beat meetings are intended to act as forums through which the public can engage with officers responsible for policing in their local area and hold them to account on the effectiveness of their services.

The frequency, format and location of beat meetings is left to force discretion. Existing meetings, such as PACT, could comply with the requirements of this legislation, if they meet certain criteria. Beat meetings do not need to be limited to face-to-face interaction. Innovative modes of communication, such as social media, can also facilitate online beat meetings.

Beat meetings criteria

Why – the government wants communities to have a greater say in how their policing services are designed and delivered. These meetings must be held regularly within each neighbourhood. Increased accountability goes hand-in-hand with greater transparency of information on policing activity.

Where – the frequency, format and neighbourhood boundaries of beat meetings should be decided between police forces and the Office of the Police and Crime Commissioner. They must be attended by a police officer and should be designed to involve a broad sector of communities.

To increase levels of public involvement, beat meetings should accommodate the ways in which local people already communicate. This requires a move beyond holding beat meetings exclusively in traditional forums (such as church halls or community centres). More innovative formats such as online beat meetings may enable police forces to better reach certain communities, as will the use of emerging and established social media platforms, such as X (formerly Twitter) and Facebook.

How – a key driver of beat meetings is to develop local accountability in policing. They provide the public with a forum to scrutinise information on local crime and anti-social behaviour, to have their views and concerns heard and taken account of by local police officers, and, where possible, to participate in developing solutions to local problems. Local crime maps provide an easy-to-use and accessible repository of information, which can form the basis for discussion at beat meetings.

For further information see:

- **Local Policing in Neighbourhoods** (available to members of the Modernising Neighbourhood Policing Knowledge Hub group)
- **8 Steps to an Effective Beat Meeting**

Community groups

Police and partner organisations work alongside a range of groups and organisations within communities whose objectives are aligned with, or relevant to, reducing crime and anti-social behaviour, and improving public safety. These include formal and informal voluntary organisations.

Voluntary sector

By working with community and voluntary sector groups, the police can make better use of resources already in the community and harness their knowledge, energy, creativity and expertise. This can assist the police and partner organisations to develop sustainable solutions to local issues.

Local landscape

Community groups may be unregulated and so do not appear on any official charity register or similar database. The police need to have knowledge of local community activity, as this should drive engagement with community groups.

For further information see **Whom the police should engage with**.

Supporting community groups

Community groups may be involved in the following.

- Taking steps to improve the local environment.
- Providing services for young people such as education programmes, sports activities and crime prevention work.
- Providing a space for people to come together.
- Providing services for the community as a whole, such as lunch clubs, exercise classes or crèches.
- Working with people requiring ad hoc or voluntary support. In this context, the term ad hoc or voluntary support is used to encompass the range of people supported by various voluntary support groups within the local community who may or may not come into contact with the police.

This may include cared for adults, older people and people with disabilities, who may require ad hoc or day-to-day support or assistance.

When engaging and/or working with community groups, it is important for the police to consider the appropriate amount of support or oversight they need to provide. This is required to ensure that activity is in accordance with equality duties, designed for the benefit of the wider community and aligned with the objectives of improving public safety and reducing crime and anti-social behaviour.

For further information see NPIA. (n.d.). **Local Policing and Confidence**.

Under-represented groups

Effective, ongoing community engagement develops confidence and feelings of security within neighbourhoods. Engagement plans should specifically address the needs of under-represented community groups as people from these groups are less likely to have their priorities reflected in policing activity. Similarly, the police are less likely to be aware of the issues affecting them.

Case study

South Wales Police carry out deaf PACT meetings, which take place at a local club for deaf people. These meetings enable deaf people to identify issues around crime and anti-social behaviour that are of particular interest to them, and to receive information on police action to address these issues.

The police fund a sign language interpreter to attend deaf PACT meetings, and a dedicated police community support officer acts as the deaf community ward contact.

Tailored engagement

A key aspect of community engagement is providing information on policing in a format and context that meets locally identified needs. This may require a diverse range of communication options and tactics.

Those involved in face-to-face engagement with people from under-represented groups should understand how individuals and groups choose to communicate. Appropriate adjustments should be made to modes of communication, for example, when meeting people with disabilities.

Inappropriate engagement

Engagement with under-represented groups is crucial. This should be based on community needs and should be proportionate to the desire of particular groups to engage with the police. Inappropriate engagement strategies can damage community relations in some instances and may be less beneficial to community confidence than no engagement at all.

Independent advisory groups

Independent advisory groups (IAGs) should reflect the diversity of local communities and can advise the force on policies and procedures. An IAG can help to build trust and confidence within the community, and can help the police to understand the implications or effect of policies and actions on different communities within the force area.

Using IAGs or community cohesion groups is important when building community relationships. In some cases these groups can identify and advise on the best ways to access under-represented community groups.

For further information go to:

- ACPO. (2011). **Independent Advisory Groups: Advice and Guidance on the Role, Function and Governance of IAGs**
- College of Policing (2024) Independent advisory groups and scrutiny panels - **Independent advisory groups and scrutiny panels in policing**

Advisory groups

A number of formally constituted groups already exist:

- disability advisory groups
- gypsy and traveller advisory groups
- lesbian, gay, bisexual and transgender advisory groups
- youth groups

Partnership working

Police community engagement work should be integrated with engagement developed by partnership organisations, including the voluntary sector. This mitigates the potential for duplication of effort and helps to ensure that information and knowledge from as wide a range of

relevant sources as possible drives the delivery of policing services. A key part of improving public confidence is joining up service delivery on the front line. Partnership engagement can allow a holistic approach to improving safety and wellbeing and raise confidence in local service delivery as a whole.

For further information see:

- **Community groups**
- NPIA. (n.d.). **Local Policing and Confidence**

General principles

Police and partners engaging successfully with communities should:

- have a detailed, neighbourhood-level understanding of the demographics of the area they serve
- have a detailed and regularly updated picture of the interests, needs, priorities and preferences of communities in their area
- adopt an approach to engagement that reflects an understanding of how different communities feel most comfortable in interacting with the police and community safety partners
- have an ongoing and consistent dialogue with all sections of communities (including under-represented groups), listening, acting and reporting back on actions taken
- allow priorities and service delivery strategies to be driven by concerns and priorities determined by local communities
- deliver services in partnership with the community, both groups and individuals

Case study

StreetSafe is a community-driven partnership engagement operation that takes place across Barrow and South Lakeside in Cumbria. It is organised by Cumbria Constabulary and driven by the needs of police and partners, including the local council, fire service, environmental health and volunteer groups.

For further information go to **StreetSafe | Police.uk**.

Neighbourhood visits

During StreetSafe operations, each home in a neighbourhood is visited by a uniformed officer, such as a police or fire officer, and at least one other representative, such as a local councillor. The

StreetSafe visit allows residents to discuss problems and concerns in their local area, and uses a community questionnaire to gather specific information relating to crime and community issues from each home. This raises awareness of the problems in the local area to the agencies involved.

Some of the community problems are resolved during the operation, such as removing fly-tipping or graffiti, or installing smoke alarms.

Information sharing

Partners collate information on a daily basis – for example, calls to environmental health, trading standards, licensing, ward councillors, park rangers and housing authorities – which can reveal local concerns. Local partnerships need to introduce a method to ensure that this information is collated centrally and fed into the intelligence processes

For further information see:

- **Information Sharing for Community Safety**
- APP on **intelligence management**

Developing protocols

Developing information-sharing protocols for community safety partners is one way to ensure that this local knowledge is shared with neighbourhood teams. It is essential that robust and appropriate information-sharing protocols are in place both across the responsible authorities, as well as across the broader partnership.

Digital and social media

Digital media – this is any storage device or computer that holds digital data. It includes information generated and stored in the computer, such as data, voice and video, as well as any information presented on a website or blog, such as TV, newspaper or magazine content.

Social media – any online technology that allows people to publish, converse and share content online is referred to as social media.

Many police forces realise that there is an increasing need to use digital and social media to engage and communicate with the members of the public. Traditional methods of getting the police

message out are having less impact and reaching fewer people. See **engagement**.

Easy access to technology, inexpensive broadband connections and the growing use of mobile internet mean that an online presence is part of everyday lives. The police service is now engaging and being engaged in ways that are unprecedented in the history of UK policing.

Principles of online engagement

There are a number of established principles to be aware of when using technology as part of online **community engagement**. These include being the following.

- **Credible** – communities like to engage with police officers and police staff. Be accurate, open, fair, honest and transparent in what you write.
- **Consistent** – encourage constructive feedback and discussion. Be professional and honest – friendly but not familiar.
- **Responsive** – wherever possible, respond to content posted by others, whether positive or negative. Reflect the real situation. Communities value honest feedback.
- **An ambassador** – you are an ambassador for your force and the police service as a whole. Exercise sound judgement and common sense.
- **Inclusive** – digital engagement is an additional tool to use. Ensure that you have a range of ways to engage with communities. Not everyone has access to the internet. Continue to highlight key messages through other conventional means, such as newsletters, public meetings and street briefings.
- **Ethical** – generally, you should not post any information or messages on the internet that you would be unwilling to release to the press or say at a public meeting. Information posted online should not:
  - contain protectively marked or otherwise sensitive information
  - discriminate on any grounds, or appear to support discriminatory attitudes
  - be libellous
  - breach copyright
  - undermine operational activities
  - damage the reputation of the police service
- **Personable** – ensure that sites are engaging and interesting. Neighbourhood policing is delivered by people working in communities. Online personality should reflect officer and staff members, but

at the same time represent individual force values.

For further information see ACPO. (2013). **Guidelines on the Safe Use of the Internet and Social Media by Police Officers and Police Staff**.

Managing online communities

Community management is the act of engaging members of a specific group in a participatory fashion.

When managing online communities, the following points should be considered.

- **Content** – ongoing narratives (stories) that educate, inspire, inform and connect community members.
- **Context** – deep understanding of how participants within the community want to engage and the tools they use to do so.
- **Connectivity** – connecting members of the community in mutually beneficial ways.
- **Continuity** – sustained effort over time, ensuring that the community is healthy and productive.
- **Collaboration** – this is established through collaborative efforts of participants who share, co-create and edit each others' efforts.

Types of online activities

These activities can range from writing and maintaining a blog or X (formerly Twitter) account, to updating and maintaining Facebook or force websites.

Online communities are websites where people can engage and discuss particular subjects. These communities usually form around shared interests. Participants engaging with the police may seek value from such online communities and forces should, therefore, consider both the **legal framework** and risk management.

Risk management

It is easy to access social media tools and websites, but there are many risks associated with online tools. These risks can be managed and mitigated by following safe usage policies.

For further information see **Get Safe Online**.

Safe passwords

Strong passwords use a mixture of numbers, letters and special characters. It is essential to keep passwords private.

Phishing

These fake emails attempt to gain personal details from unsuspecting users. They often purport to come from banks, credit card agencies or online shops. They include a link to a website (which usually looks official), which then requests the receiver's personal details, including account details and/or passwords. Personal details should never be disclosed in an email.

Secure websites

One way of checking that a website is secure is to look for 'https//' in the address. The 's' added shows that it is secure. Somewhere on the web browser there will also be a padlock sign that will link to the certificate, which means that a third party has verified the identity of the website. If in doubt, speak to the force IT department.

Digital and social media platforms

Forces are using social media sites as a method of widening their access to communities and engaging with people through their preferred method of communication. As social media uses increases, new and emergent platforms including Instagram, TikTok and Snapchat are also being used to reach certain audience segments.

Digital and social media platforms are software or technology that enables users to build, integrate or facilitate community interaction and user-generated content.

Facebook

This is a social networking website. Users can join networks of friends, family and colleagues, and can update personal profiles about themselves. Facebook is important in establishing the police corporate identity, whether at a national, force or neighbourhood level.

X

Formerly known as Twitter, X is a micro-blogging social media platform. Users can post messages of up to 280 characters per post, which makes them easy to read and write. The messages can be read by anyone if the author's profile is public. However, people who subscribe to the author's page are known as 'followers'. Messages can be sent and received through a number of mechanisms, including personal computers, mobiles and websites. X is particularly important in sharing breaking news, and subscribers frequently post stories before they are reported in more traditional media forms, such as television news or newspapers.

YouTube

YouTube has proved important for police forces to deliver videos broadcasting road safety messages and updates on public order situations. YouTube can be used as a platform for messages that are critical of policing issues.

Blog

This is short for 'weblog', and it is an online journal. Users make regular entries of commentary, often describing events with links to video or photos. Blogging is less common among the police than X (formally Twitter), but some police websites include the use of individual officer blogs.

Social media monitoring

The growth in social media has seen a shift in how police forces communicate and engage with the public. Some forces are now using online monitoring tools to track and follow web-based conversations. Monitoring tools are currently available on the market and have been designed to track online conversations, identify emerging issues and monitor the online communities most influential to the police. These help to:

- understand the policing issues that people are talking about online
- decide how best to engage with communities to impart confidence in the police

By using digital technology and social media monitoring, forces are able to engage with communities and work together to understand and respond to the needs of their communities.

Hot topics

Highlighting hot topics and emerging issues enables the police to identify which sites are generating the most positive and negative comments about them. This helps them to spot the most

active communities discussing the police, and find out their opinions in such discussions. This, in turn, can help the police when developing a social media strategy. Communicating through social media channels requires a different approach and tone from the police. Understanding more about how communities talk to each other helps forces to find the right voice.

Digitally enabled meetings

Digital engagement includes using technology in a wider context than social media sites. New technology creates opportunities to extend the reach of the traditional meeting so that people who could not ordinarily attend, because of commitments, disabilities or locality, have the opportunity to participate and access meetings. The key to this process is that one form of engagement does not replace another, but that wider opportunities to participate are integrated within engagement processes.

Tags

Engagement and communication