

Loughton Black reference group – improving the relationship between the Black community and Essex Police

A bi-monthly meeting to strengthen trust between Essex Police and the Black community, by discussing the Police Race Action Plan (PRAP) to improve transparency and cohesion.

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Key details

Stage of practice	Untested
Purpose	Organisational
Topic	Community engagement Diversity, equality and inclusion (DEI)
Organisation	Essex Police
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Region	Eastern
Partners	Police
Stage of implementation	The practice is implemented.
Start date	March 2024
Scale of initiative	Local

Key details

Target group	Adults Children and young people Communities General public Race/ethnicity
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Aim

The aim of Loughton Black reference group is to:

- encourage meaningful dialogue between Essex Police and the Black community
- ensure that the Black community can share their policing views and experiences
- discuss the Police Race Action Plan (PRAP) and reaffirm the force's commitment to delivering its objectives
- encourage the Black community to participate in the force's engagement activities, such as the ride-along scheme and independent advisory groups (IAGs)
- foster transparency, collaboration, and trust to build confidence in Essex Police within the Black community

Intended outcome

The intended outcomes of the Loughton Black reference group are to:

- enhance community engagement using PRAP
- increase the number of opportunities for meaningful dialogue, collaboration, and shared understanding
- improve trust and confidence in policing by ensuring transparency, accountability, and genuine partnership with the Black community

Description

Feedback from community engagement sessions highlighted the need for a dedicated space for the Black community to share their concerns and experiences of policing. In response, Essex Police

established the Loughton Black reference group. The force were keen to implement the group within the community, rather than requiring members to travel to an Essex Police site.

Planning

The planning process commenced with identifying the following key objectives:

- improving transparency
- fostering two-way communication
- ensuring lived experiences inform policing practices

The force mapped out discussion topics such as PRAP, the ride-along scheme, and IAGs. The human resource (HR) superintendent also identified objectives which aligned to the force's PRAP aims and diversity, equality and inclusion (DEI) strategy.

Roles and teams

The initiative is led by the diversity and inclusion team, supported by the community policing teams and a dedicated multi-ethnic support association (MESA) support officer. The senior leadership team provided oversight to the implementation of the group, while the diversity team provided administrative support.

Implementation

The group has been launched through targeted outreach, including direct engagement with community leaders and local organisations. The meetings are scheduled at an accessible community based venue, with agendas focused on transparency and collaboration. The two-hour meetings include presentations on PRAP progress, open Q&A, and discussions on practical initiatives like the ride-along scheme and IAGs. Community representatives were identified through existing networks. Initially, each potential representative was approached by phone to explain the purpose of forming a reference group and to gauge their interest. Following these conversations, formal invitations were sent out via email, outlining the aims of the group and providing further information on the commitment of being a representative.

Initially, the meetings were held quarterly and are now held bi-monthly. The meetings are promoted through community members and existing IAGs, to encourage new members to join. The group has

an average attendance of ten community members.

Funding and senior management approval

To deliver the sessions, £50 per quarter is allocated from the force's diversity and inclusion budget to cover the venue hire and refreshments.

Approval for the planning and implementation of the group was obtained by the local policing area commander.

Evaluation

Data monitoring is planned and will be led by Essex Police. The proposed methodology is to conduct a survey to assess whether there has been an increase in trust and confidence. The survey will aim to measure perceptions of policing, the effectiveness of the reference group, and whether members feel they are influencing Essex Police's policies.

Overall impact

The group membership has steadily increased, attracting a range of voices from the local Black community. The increase in participation has enabled meaningful discussions and provided valuable lived experiences that are informing Essex Police's approach to delivering PRAP.

Members have welcomed the group for creating a safe space for open dialogue, which has strengthened trust and engagement. The successful approach used to deliver the group has since been replicated in north Essex.

Learning

What went well

- One of the key successes has been the willingness of community members to contribute honestly and constructively from the outset. Members' openness has highlighted that when people feel they are genuinely being listened to, engagement naturally grows.
- Hosting the meetings within the community, rather than asking people to travel, has played a significant part in encouraging attendance and fostering a sense of shared ownership.

- It has been essential to establish strong partnership working. The group has provided real-time feedback on local policing issues, supporting the force with identifying concerns early and influence PRAP activities. The group has also enhanced the force's understanding of community priorities and engaging with the Black community.
- There were no challenges in securing funding, as the costs are minimal. It is important to identify a clear budget from the outset to avoid implementation delays. The funding ensures that that meetings can be confidently planned without disruptions.

Challenges

- One of the biggest challenges has been encouraging community engagement and finding a suitable venue. Once these logistical issues were resolved, engagement increased and meaningful discussions commenced.
- Initial support required patience and time. While interest was positive, some community members were understandably cautious about whether the group would lead to real change. To build members' trust, the force has been consistent, transparent and provided clear follow-up actions between meetings.

Recommendations

- Start with existing relationships, using established community contacts to encourage the group to have legitimacy from the outset.
- Ensure that early engagement is personal. Initial phone conversations have been vital in explaining the purpose and addressing questions before formal invitations were sent out.
- Choose an accessible location to foster participation and demonstrate the force's commitment to the Black community.
- Attendance, membership and areas of focus may naturally shift as the group matures and confidence grows.
- It is important to be prepared to invest time in trust-building, as communities may want to see evidence of commitment before they participate in a group.

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