



THINKING

What impact will the government's 'big society' have on policing? **Martin Innes** says two pilot projects in Cardiff shows the police service what the government wants officers to do and how effective it can be

It is becoming increasingly clear that there are fundamentally two ideas animating the government's agenda. Paramount is the need to reduce the structural deficit.

The comprehensive spending review has started to trace out the consequences of this for the police and criminal justice system, although it remains to be seen whether the aspirational cuts can actually be delivered as reality bites.

The second key idea is, as yet, more nebulous and less defined, but has the potential to be more profound over the long term. This is the concept of the 'big society'.

David Halpern (formerly Tony Blair's 'Respect Agenda' guru, and new head of the Cabinet Office's 'behavioural insights team') has, in an article in *Prospect* magazine in August, identified three main strands to the 'big society'. These are com-

munity empowerment; social action; and reform of public services. The latter is important in that it is envisaged as a necessary condition that would allow the other two strands to be embedded and gain traction.

The essence of the government's public service reform programme pivots around 'de-cluttering' and 'simplifying' public institutions and policy. This is evident in the speech by Home Secretary Theresa May to the Conservative Party conference where she stated that 'cutting crime is the only test of a police force and catching criminals is their job'.

While such a statement provides clarity of mission, it is perhaps difficult to see how it links the police role with the mechanics of developing a 'big society'. If, however, we allow for a more nuanced position on the police function in society, the po-

tential connections between the police role and the big society are more visible.

Beneficial alternatives

Intellectually, there are two schools of thought that appear to be influential in shaping how the big society idea is evolving: the 'nudgers' and the 'networkers'. The former is based upon the notion that people should be provided with choices about the services they receive, but that the way in which the different options are presented can be used to 'nudge' people to select more socially beneficial alternatives.

One possible hypothetical example of this could be establishing an expectation that police staff would also serve as Special constables. This would be a default position when people apply for all such posts and they would have to opt out of this



HEAVY HANDED A new way of thinking suggest that by actively engaging the public with policing, a gentler narrative can become an agent for community mobilisation

BIG

scheme if they did not want to participate. In contrast, the 'networkers' argue that the key focus for government should be on harnessing the power of people's social networks in pursuing its aims.

So, for example, the police could use established community networks to 'virally' communicate crime prevention or reassurance messages, rather than rely upon reporting of police stories in local newspapers.

Such ideas are starting to permeate policy formulation. For example, in the Home Office's policy document *Policing in the 21st century*, there are effectively three 'big ticket' reform items: police and crime commissioners, and changing how the police service is held accountable; the National Crime Agency; and fostering civic action and involvement in the delivery of criminal justice services.

The first and last of these are directly relevant to the big society. How then should police approach these ideas and make sense of them?

The big society is designed to be embedded across key areas of public policy in order to transform the relationship between state and civil society. Consequently, there are a variety of sugges-

tions about how it can be applied, not all of which are relevant to policing. There are, however, three key principles that are likely to guide how the drive towards a big society will shape policing.

These are:

- seeing like a citizen;
- participative policing;
- see-through services.

The first of these contends that police should find ways to view the world through the eyes of the public, rather than focusing solely upon those issues to which the criminal justice system attaches particular value.

This sees officers attending to problems on the basis of the harm they cause to the public, rather than whether they are defined as crimes or not in law. In effect, the imperative is to ensure that the public's problems are established as police priorities.

Participative policing is about finding ways to involve those beyond the police in the conduct of policing. This encompasses other public service agencies, social enterprises, businesses and citizens more directly.

Making the police service more 'see through' is about enhancing transparency and accountability. A central aim of the government appears to be to make performance data more understandable and relevant to the public.

For example, ministers have mooted that raw crime data should be made available to the public in order that it can be 'mashed' and 'crowd-sourced', with citizen activists using their multimedia skills to produce insights into how well local police officers are performing. 'Mashing' involves combining one data source with another to produce something new. 'Crowd-sourcing' is where

multiple users actively collaborate on a project, based upon the idea that their collective wisdom will be superior to that of any one participant acting in isolation.

Neighbourhood development

Cast in this way, the impetus for reform provided by the big society has much in common with the key type of reforms evident in policing over the past decade. For example, if we take the idea of 'seeing like a citizen', this has been central to the development of neighbourhood policing. Through police and community together 'PACT' meetings and other ways of engaging with the public such as key individual networks, local policing has become increasingly responsive to citizens' demands.

These same arrangements, at least where they are used most effectively, are also making the decision-making processes about how and why the police adopt particular courses of action more transparent. In this respect, the police service has been doing the big society for a while now. The challenge is how to make these principles reach deeper and more widely in the organisation?

In Wales, the Universities' Police Science Institute has been working for the past two years with South Wales Police to find ways in which police interventions can be organised to trigger community mobilisation. Our interest in this stems from our involvement in the experimental forerunner of neighbourhood policing – the national reassurance policing programme (2003/05). For although the work principally focused on addressing 'the reassurance gap' (the mismatch between the public's perceptions of crime, fear, and actual crime rates), the Home Office evaluation recorded a interesting outcomes in some of the trial sites:



BEHAVING BADLY Community policing has resulted in a positive change to neighbourhoods

- four out of 16 sites recorded increased levels of trust between neighbours
- in the Ingol ward in Lancashire, there was a 14 per cent increase in community cohesion over the trial period
- and four sites also saw increases in residents believing neighbours would intervene to address problematic behaviour.

Because these kinds of outcomes were not the principal focus of the trial, relatively little attention was paid to them at the time. In the current climate, however, they become far more salient. This is particularly so given that, in the original reassurance policing model, emphasis was placed on the importance of police working with their partners and the public to produce solutions to local problems.

In many of the sites, police struggled with this element, and as such, it was quietly dropped in the transition to neighbourhood policing. Instead the focus remained squarely on the police and partner roles, rather than how they could actively involve the public in developing and delivering neighbourhood security solutions.

However, analysis of the data does suggest that, at least in a minority of the trial sites, police were having some success in improving community resilience. Consequently, in the South Wales Police area recently we have been revisiting this agenda with some success.

As part of a force-wide community-intelligence interviewing programme where members of the public were interviewed using cognitive interviewing techniques about their local fears and concerns, the researchers identified that 'drugs problems' were a key concern in a part of Cardiff where police had very little intelligence to that effect.

However, the local superintendent took the decision to investigate the community intelligence provided and covert surveillance teams were sent to the areas of the city identified by the public. They reported the presence of an open drugs market. The intelligence collected by the covert teams, has so far resulted in the arrest of more than 90 individuals, contributing to the significant reductions in recorded crime seen in Cardiff over the

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past year (down 13 per cent between April and September this year). The salience of this for the big society is that it starts to indicate how community concerns can be brought together with interventions designed to have an impact on serious organised crime.

In a second example from the same programme, analysis of the community intelligence identified a particular superstore at the centre of a crime and disorder hotspot. The findings were relayed to the owners, who took action to improve the physical environment around the store. As a result, calls to the police about anti-social behaviour from that location dropped significantly; anti-social behaviour was no longer identified as a local PACT meeting priority and the store saw an increase in its footfall of 4,000 customers in a month.

This is the big society in action – empowering

others to deal with problems that they can shape and influence, and in the process leveraging wider social and economic benefits.

So far, the emerging agenda for police reform has appeared rather incoherent. Neither government nor ACPO have crafted a compelling narrative about the social functions of policing and how these are to be accomplished. This reflects the tensions that exist between the economic (deficit reduction) and political (foster a big society) imperatives driving the government's wider project.

Do less with more

Policing in the ways outlined above is potentially important inasmuch as it starts to suggest key elements of this new narrative for policing – based around the notion that police interventions can act as an agent for community mobilisation. The public is not just there to be consulted by police, but to be actively engaged in producing solutions together.

Adopting this approach takes us along a different trajectory from that being pursued hitherto. Responding to the perilous macro-economic environment, the mantra of senior police officers recently has focused upon the need for policing to 'do more with less'.

In actuality, the political impetus of the big society is about 'doing less, with more'. A narrative for policing the big society should be anchored in police interventions being precisely targeted towards key security needs, so that while on aggregate there is 'less' policing, it is delivered in ways that leverage the involvement of more people in producing community safety. ■

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