

Home Office Police Front Line Review 2018/2019

Key themes in qualitative research projects with police forces in England and Wales

1. Purpose

This paper provides a high-level overview of the consistent key themes identified across qualitative research undertaken with police forces across England and Wales, by the Institute for Public Safety, Crime and Justice since June 2016.

The findings should be used to inform the Front Line Review by focussing attention towards the issues, challenges and opportunities raised by police officers, staff and volunteers delivering frontline policing services. The intention of this paper is to share recent and relevant research findings and to recognise the time and effort that many frontline individuals have put into research and engagement exercises, across topics relevant to this review.

2. Evidence

The key themes outlined in this paper are drawn from the findings of qualitative data collection and analysis across 11 projects completed between June 2016 and January 2019. This includes five projects involving singular forces, two regional projects, two projects involving five forces, one involving three forces and one national project. The geographical spread of the forces involved include large and small forces across both urban and rural areas, span across the north and south of England and include one force in Wales. The project reports are confidential; however, forces have agreed to the findings being used to inform academic, policy and practice improvement, with assurances of anonymity in publicly available documents.

The research included in this review examines a variety of broad themes; perceptions and experiences working in policing; wellbeing, coaching, support and management; 'frontline' experiences and opportunities and blockers to change and transformation. The collective data draws upon the perceptions and experiences shared by 415 police officers and staff through one-to-one interviews (216 participants) and in-depth focus group discussions (199 participants). Of those 415 participants, 341 were paid police officers or staff and 74 were Special Constables or police support volunteers. The majority of these qualitative projects also invited participation through online surveys and provided the opportunity for open-text responses which have been coded and themed. This qualitative survey data draws upon a total of 8,843 participants, made up of 5,791 paid police officers or staff, and 3,052 Special Constables or police support volunteers. The majority of the projects used thematic analysis to draw inferences from the data and one project used grounded theory. See Appendix I for more information. This brief report therefore presents a snapshot of current thinking and perceptions amongst frontline police officers, police staff, PSCOs, Special Constables and police support volunteers.

3. Findings

The findings outlined below were evidenced in the majority of the 11 projects included in this review.

3.1 Workload; internal inefficiencies and job satisfaction

Workload is identified as a key driver of satisfaction with job role. Perceptions of ‘workload’ in this context tend to be described in three distinct ways: volume of work or duties directly associated with delivering the core role; ‘internal demand’ - processes and administrative work associated with facilitating the core role; and ‘external demand’ – work created by the failings of external processes, partnerships and services. Volume of work is least likely to be the cause of dissatisfaction in role, or lower motivation or wellbeing, because the majority of this work is directly delivering the core function of the role. This means that whilst volume creates high pressure and sometimes unmanageable workloads, the motivation and energy to do the job remains high enough to support a positive attitude and pride in personal contribution. However, ‘internal demand’ created by inefficiencies and ineffectiveness in policies, processes, systems and communication - often described as ‘failure demand’ - generates significant frustration with workload and role. Wider research supports the theory that organisational factors, rather than operational factors – the context of the job, rather than the content of the job, are the leading sources of stress for police officers (Shane, 2010, Hesketh et al., 2014).

Examples of internal inefficiencies include working across multiple IT systems and data reporting tools, double-keying, multiple levels of authorisation and audit and creating activity and output data for internal performance management, reporting and meetings. For many, the distance between these internal demands and the core purpose of frontline policing is too far to maintain the strength of motivation, pride and energy to support job satisfaction. In line with this, the workload created by ‘external demand’ is also perceived to be outside of the scope and purpose of frontline policing, often involving individuals and families requiring social care and health services rather than policing intervention. This can reduce the morale and motivation that is generated through developing and utilising skills and expertise to achieve policing outcomes.

Reducing internal inefficiencies has been consistently highlighted by frontline officers and staff as an opportunity to improve individual and collective outcomes, which could contribute to creating space for ideas and innovation and improving wellbeing for those where workload is a factor.

3.2 Recognition; expertise and discretionary effort

Rather than framing reward and recognition in terms of pay, promotion, awards or other forms of feedback, frontline officers and staff tend to draw a relationship between feeling their skills, expertise and effort leads to positive outcomes for policing, the public and specifically for victims. The ability to do their job well and to demonstrate the connection between their knowledge and experience and what they are able to deliver, is found to impact upon feeling rewarded and recognised and higher discretionary effort. Alternatively, where frontline officers and staff feel ‘interchangeable’, treated as a collar number and a ‘commodity’, this psychological contract between the individual and the force is damaged, leading to a lack of personal investment in delivery and outcomes and reduced discretionary effort. This finding is supported by research by Hesketh et al., (2016) which shows that security in role and feeling a sense of control over the role being delivered, tend to contribute to greater discretionary effort. This is particularly evident for those who have experienced extremely swift movement in roles and areas of responsibility and those who have been moved from specialist areas of policing ‘back to the frontline’. These issues are linked to perceptions of poor transparency in decision-making and rationale for change and a lack of fairness in access to opportunities for personal and professional development.

Our research findings suggest a change in expectations about reward and recognition in policing in recent years, where receiving training and lateral development is perceived as recognition and investment. This appears to be caused by restricted access to even basic training, and the importance of confidence and competence in performing well in role and maintaining positive relationships with peers and management. It is evident across studies that the majority of the frontline do not display confidence that the training they receive effectively equips them for the job roles they perform. Whilst levels of confidence in decision-making and use of professional judgement tend to be high in policing, this appears to be driven by the lack of available support and supervision rather than the growth of competence in role. This was supported by findings that the majority of frontline officers do not feel they would be supported if a mistake was made. The attention of senior leadership is often directed towards specific individuals on the frontline when something has gone wrong, as opposed to identifying and recognising effort and outcomes of good work.

Across the studies examined for this paper it is shown that the majority of frontline officers and staff enjoy their role and feel pride in what they do. Whilst this is not found to be related to feeling recognised by leadership, the role of peer recognition and peer support is evident in descriptions of enjoyment and satisfaction with the work. Wider literature supports the view that it is a behavioural norm in policing to go over and above core responsibilities and that this underpins police organisational identity (Hoggett, et. al., 2014). This is described as ‘organisational citizenship behaviour’, which plays a significant role in self-esteem in identities in policing and the way recognition is weaved into this culture (Hoggett et. al., 2014). However, working extra hours and taking on extra responsibilities can be counter-intuitive for managing wellbeing, reducing an ‘impression management’ culture and optimising discretionary effort (O’Grady, 2018; Organ et al., 2006).

3.3 Performance management and innovation

The pervasive culture around understanding and managing performance through the use of numerical targets in policing continues to be identified by frontline officers and staff as the fundamental blocker to generating a learning culture which fosters innovation and effective problem-solving. Senior leaders are often perceived to be ‘out of touch’ with the realities of frontline policing and middle management tend to hold a reputation which leans towards simplistic assessment of outputs, personal reputation management and lack transparency in effectively communicating between the frontline and senior leaders. A ‘blame culture’ continues to be referenced by frontline officers and staff, which inevitably stifles ideas and innovation and erodes perceptions of support for developing new models or approaches to policing.

Whilst creating a learning culture and notions of evidence-based policing are increasingly evident in frontline narratives about policing, the research findings suggest that projects in these areas are the exception. Change programmes and new initiatives are often associated with the advancement of specific individuals rather than organisational learning and evidence, causing perceptions of bias in related performance analysis and assessment of outcomes.

Approaches to performance management have also been criticised by frontline officers and staff as focussing attention towards specific teams or departments, driving silo working and reducing assessments of resourcing against outcomes at the strategic level. There is widespread understanding of the financial position of policing and keen support to identify and remove waste, however this energy is often lost through perceptions of poor decision-making by senior leaders about resource management. In many examples these perceptions may have been changed through more effective communication about change programmes and resource allocation,

particularly in relation to collaborations. Improving communication with the frontline about opportunities to improve practice, where leadership are perceived to be genuinely listening and gathering information to explore ideas, can stimulate teams and individuals to find resources to test new ideas and to remove barriers to change.

3.4 Leadership and management

Whilst there are references to positive, engaging and inspiring supervision and management in policing, which generally appears in teams with lower demand, more predictable demand or with a lower volume of work, descriptions of middle management tend to reflect dissatisfaction or disillusionment. Whilst perceptions and relationships with direct line managers are inconsistent; often positive where they are perceived to be part of the team and therefore ‘part of the struggle’; or negative, often driven by a perceived lack of interest and support for the individual and their personal circumstances and areas of interest and expertise. Wider research suggests that where approaches to supervision frequently reflect positive behaviours and rarely negative behaviours, employees report having better psychological wellbeing, which increases their resilience and ability to perform their roles (Hesketh et al., 2014; Gilbreath & Benson, 2004). These ‘positive behaviours’ include communication, consideration, support, organising work to minimise stressful periods and leadership to demonstrate to employees that they are part of something important and valued. Whereas ‘negative behaviours’ reflect the opposite, creating a focus on performance and productivity at the expense of wellbeing. Our findings suggest this focus on performance plays out as supervisors ‘counting’ the activities and outputs of individuals and teams and creating a culture of punishment for lower ‘productivity’ and competitiveness between teams.

Our research evidence points to a collective sense that overt commitment to management, including identifying areas for professional development, engaging in Personal Development Reviews and capturing evidence of progress, is ‘wasted time’. Those who have disengaged from PDR processes altogether also tend to have more negative perceptions of their direct line manager. The PDR is consistently highly unpopular, which is linked to earlier findings related to a perceived lack of transparency and fairness in access to training and developing specialist skills and experience. Investing in officers as individuals with skills and experience, reduces feelings of being an interchangeable ‘commodity’ and increases feelings of being recognised and valued.

3.5 Summary

In summary, the points made in this paper collectively create an environment in which effective performance management at the individual level becomes very complex. Perceptions or experiences of inadequate training, lack of investment in personal and professional development, swift movement between roles and teams, lack of support and high impact of internal inefficiencies, inevitably leads to individuals being unable or unwilling to deliver their role effectively. The lack of particularly positive or negative outcomes for frontline police officers and staff appears to facilitate inertia, exacerbated by change programmes either lacking in objective evidence and rationale or hindered by ineffective communication. Despite this context, the majority of officers feel proud of their role, enjoy what they do and demonstrate high levels of commitment and energy to support their colleagues and to provide the best possible service to the public.

Author:

Dr Laura Knight, Director, Institute for Public Safety, Crime and Justice

Contributors:

Dr Iain Britton, Kath Cahalin, Dr Matthew Callender, Dr Berni Doran, Dan Moloney and Valentina Lugli.

Contact: Dr Laura Knight

Email: Laura.Knight@northampton.ac.uk

Mobile: 07850260029

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