



# NPIA

National Policing  
Improvement Agency

CITIZEN FOCUS AND  
NEIGHBOURHOOD  
POLICING  
PROGRAMME

# Information provision: evidence-based top tips

This paper provides an overview of the research evidence on information provision to help the police improve service delivery. It also highlights a series of practical steps that may have benefits in the shorter term. The summary does not provide a comprehensive assessment of ‘what works’, but draws on the best evidence currently available.



## Evidence summary

### Informing the public

The Policing Pledge seeks to improve the responsiveness of the police by setting out a series of commitments on the quality of services to be delivered to the public. Providing information has a key role in the Pledge. Forces are expected to give people details of their neighbourhood policing team (Pledge Point 2) and provide monthly updates on local crime and policing issues (Pledge Point 8). A recent inspection, however, found delivery of the Pledge was mixed, with most forces achieving a fair rating.<sup>1</sup>

Overall, survey research has suggested people who are well-informed about policing are more likely to hold better opinions of the police.<sup>2</sup> A Rapid Evidence Assessment (REA), carried out for the NPIA, also found a growing body of research which has shown that information can have a positive impact on perceptions.

Few drawbacks were identified in the REA. Overall, general information has not been found to increase worries about crime. A degree of caution is still required. Special care will be needed where information has the potential to make the public feel less safe and secure. A small and inconclusive US study, for example, has suggested written notifications sent to



1 HMIC (2009) Responsive Policing: Delivering the Policing Pledge. Strategic Overview. London: COI.

2 Bradford et al. (2009) ‘Contact and Confidence: Revisiting the Impact of Public Encounters with the Police’. Policing and Society 19 (1).

residents about local sex offenders might have increased personal fear of being a victim (although other factors were also found to be important).<sup>3</sup>

### Information and engagement

A Home Office literature review has described information provision as a form of community engagement.<sup>4</sup> The review suggested that giving out information offered a way of engaging citizens who were unwilling or unable to take on a more active role (e.g. attending meetings). Information provision should not be seen as a replacement for face-to-face engagement, because it is more passive and requires a lower level of active public participation.

Community engagement is likely to work best when tailored to the needs of local citizens and part of a wider package of activities aimed at improving public perceptions.<sup>5</sup> When engagement has been used to inform good quality problem-solving within neighbourhood policing, confidence in the police has increased.<sup>6</sup>

### The impact of newsletters

The provision of local information can be used to enhance the effect of neighbourhood policing. Research by the

Metropolitan Police has shown that neighbourhood policing newsletters can improve public perceptions.<sup>7</sup> Confidence in the police rose significantly in those neighbourhoods that received newsletters, but remained virtually unchanged in the areas where they were not distributed. The newsletters also led to significant improvements in public attitudes about community engagement and may have prevented opinions about police effectiveness declining.

Importantly, the design of the newsletters was informed by the views of the public. The Metropolitan Police's research found the newsletters had to be clear and concise, locally relevant, and easily identifiable as coming from the police. They also had to contain information about neighbourhood policing – particularly the team's contact details, the local priorities, the actions taken by the police, and how the public could get involved. More recent survey results have suggested newsletters that do not follow this template may not have the same effect.<sup>8</sup>

The picture across the criminal justice system is broadly consistent. Booklets that have sought to address 'gaps' in public perceptions (e.g. on crime rates and sentencing) have been found to increase knowledge of, and confidence in

the system as a whole.<sup>9</sup>

The way this information was given to people has been found to be crucial. Booklets handed out to people on their doorsteps had a bigger impact on confidence than those sent in the post.<sup>10</sup> Face-to-face contact might have encouraged people to read the booklet, but could also have had a more direct influence. Satisfactory contact with the police, for example, can increase the chances of someone being confident.<sup>11</sup> Also, US research has found that poorly implemented newsletters were less effective at reducing fear of crime than other activities which were more focused on fostering a closer working relationship between the police and the public (e.g. improved contact).<sup>12</sup>

There is little evidence to suggest newsletters increase worries about crime. One study found newsletters increased the perceived level of crime, but did not arouse fear.<sup>13</sup> The newsletters themselves were highly rated among local residents.

### The impact of crime maps

Historically, the police have tended to use maps as an internal tool to examine geographical patterns in

3 Beck & Travis (2004) 'Sex Offender Notification and Fear of Victimization'. *Journal of Criminal Justice* 32 (5).

4 Myhill (2006) *Community Engagement in Policing: Lessons from the Literature*. London: HO.

5 Myhill (2006).

6 Tuffin et al. (2006) *An Evaluation of the Impact of the National Reassurance Policing Programme*. London: HO.

7 Wunsch & Hohl (2009) 'Evidencing a "Good Practice Model" of Police Communication: The Impact of Local Policing Newsletters on Public Confidence'. *Policing: A Journal of Policy and Practice* 3 (4).

8 Wunsch (2009) *What Makes Safer Neighbourhood Newsletters Effective? A London-Wide Experiment Using the Public Attitude Survey*. London: MPS. (Unpublished).

9 Singer & Cooper (2008) *Inform, Persuade and Remind: An Evaluation of a Project to Improve Public Confidence in the Criminal Justice System*. London: MOJ.

10 Singer & Cooper (2008).

11 Myhill & Beak (2008) *Public Confidence in the Police*. London: NPIA.

12 Pate et al. (1986) *Reducing Fear of Crime in Houston and Newark*. Washington, DC: Police Foundation.

13 Lavrakas et al. (1983) 'Transmitting Information about Crime and Crime Prevention to Citizens'. *Journal of Police Science and Administration* 11 (4).

offending and help direct patrols, and have only recently started to use them as an external tool to present crime figures to the public. All forces currently make crime maps available online to fulfil their commitments under the Pledge. Despite their recent widespread use, little is known about whether crime maps can improve perceptions. To help fill this gap, the NPIA is currently carrying out a large scale evaluation to assess the impact of crime maps and other types of local information.

In the interim, a series of focus groups were carried out for the NPIA to gauge public attitudes towards crime maps and suggest ways of increasing their impact. Overall, the focus groups felt the public had a 'right' to know about crime levels locally, and supported the idea of the police providing this information. However, because people thought they already knew from personal experience which areas were safe, it was generally felt that additional information needed to be presented alongside crime maps for them to be an effective communication tool. There was particular interest in having access to information on neighbourhood policing, how the local police were performing, and crime prevention advice.

The limited research that does exist has focused on the possible shortcomings of crime maps. Overall, maps were found to be no worse, and in some cases much better, than traditional crime statistics in their effect on the fear of crime.<sup>14</sup> Also, there was found to be no difference in the extent to which maps or statistics stigmatised neighbourhoods

in terms of whether people recommended others move there.

## Short term improvement activity

The following points have been informed by focus group research and by practitioners. In addition, the Home Office has recently issued guidance on communications plans (e.g. working with the media) and is soon to release a 'Confidence Route Map'. Legal advice on publishing sentencing outcomes is also planned by the Office of Criminal Justice Reform.<sup>15</sup>

### Content and presentation

- The content and tone of police communications must be tailored to the needs of the audience.
  - Finding out what people want from information should help its provision to be better targeted.
  - Communications should always look professional. Poor presentation (such as spelling and grammatical errors) could reflect badly on the police and may result in the public dismissing the information.
  - Information for the public must be clear, concise and easy-to-read. It should be written in plain English, be short and to-the-point, and free from jargon.
- Information should be eye-catching. Material sent in the post risks being ignored as 'junk mail' if it is not easily identifiable.
  - Every suitable opportunity should be taken to include in local communications the current names, photographs and contact details of the members of neighbourhood policing teams.
  - Newsletters should be locally relevant and let people know what the police are doing to deal with their concerns. They should contain specific information on neighbourhood priorities, what actions the police have taken (including the results), and how the public can get involved. Success stories where genuine improvements have been made are likely to be important. People may also want to know how the police plan to remedy a situation where they have fallen short.
  - Crime maps should be clear and uncluttered, and allow users to search by postcode and compare crime levels in the same area over time. Up-to-date contextual information about neighbourhood policing has been found to be crucial to the public and should be linked to the map. Technical details should also be available to those who want them (e.g. crime definitions on a Frequently Asked Questions page).

14 Groff et al. (2005) 'A Randomised Experimental Study of Sharing Crime Data with Citizens: Do Maps Produce More Fear?'. *Journal of Experimental Criminology* 1.

15 Home Office (2009) *Communicating with Confidence*. London: HO. Available from: <http://www.crimereduction.homeoffice.gov.uk/learningzone/communicatingforconfidenceb.pdf>.

## Delivery

- The information provided by the police should be accessible to everyone and have a wide reach, which means a tailored approach may be needed for different groups of people.
- With a tailored approach, care is required to ensure the basic information and messages given to different groups are consistent.
- Forces should use the guidance available on how information can be made more accessible to people with particular needs (e.g. RNIB's 'See It Right' guidelines for people with sight problems).
- The public should be made aware of how to access information in other formats if required (e.g. other languages or large print).
- Newsletters and information placed in local newspapers and public places might reach a wide audience, but may not be suitable for some people (e.g. teenagers).
- While websites are increasingly important, traditional methods may offer a more direct and proactive way of communicating.
- The frequency of newsletters (or similar) must balance the need to provide timely updates to the public against the risk of information fatigue.
- Handing information to people on their doorsteps is likely to have the greatest impact. It may increase the chances of the information being read, and provides an opportunity for face-to-face contact.
- Members of the public are likely to welcome informal contact. It provides an opportunity to talk about local problems which, in itself, can be reassuring and help increase public confidence.
- Information in public places (e.g. post offices, libraries, surgeries and supermarkets) may have wide reach, but forces could focus their attention on a manageable number of key locations to ensure the information is kept up-to-date and has maximum impact.
- A range of engagement methods should be used including those supported by new technologies (e.g. virtual meetings).
- New technologies should be integrated, and used in conjunction with established engagement methods.
- Engagement through social media sites (e.g. Facebook, Twitter) can potentially be used to support neighbourhood policing and the response to critical incidents.
- Forces should consider the scope for monitoring social media (e.g. gauging the force's reputation by finding out how people talk about the local police).

We are keen to build up and share our knowledge of innovative and promising practices aimed at improving the quality of policing. If you are running a relevant initiative, or have a great idea that is having positive results, please email [nick.keane@npia.pnn.police.uk](mailto:nick.keane@npia.pnn.police.uk) and we will be publish them on the NPIA's forthcoming Policing Online Knowledge Area (POLKA). If you would like further information on the evidence base please email [paul.quinton@npia.pnn.police.uk](mailto:paul.quinton@npia.pnn.police.uk). Your regional field officer is also available to provide further advice: [www.neighbourhoodpolicing.co.uk/the\\_team.asp](http://www.neighbourhoodpolicing.co.uk/the_team.asp)