Creativity, confidence and courage: Strategies to promote an innovative police workforce for the future

West Yorkshire for Innovation workshop at the *N8 Policing Research Partnership Knowledge Exchange Conference: 'Workforce of the Future of Policing'*, 8th June 2016

Introduction

The workshop run by West Yorkshire for Innovation (WyFi) focused on the question of innovation in policing, specifically what it is, what barriers exist to it, and how a culture of innovation may be created and nurtured. The workshop took the form of a presentation by DI Andy Staniforth, head of WyFi, interspersed by facilitated group discussions around those three key questions. There were 35 participants representing a broad cross-section of policing and academia, with participants from 8 police forces, 7 universities, a Police and Crime Commissioner's Office and the College of Policing. The majority of participants were from policing and included both staff and officers, ranging in rank from Sergeant to Assistant Chief Constable, with duties covering areas as diverse as response, investigation, counter terrorism, community cohesion, digital engagement, corporate performance, demand management, futures analysis and horizon scanning, business change and innovation. Academic participants included lecturers, research associates and fellows, graduate students and policy and research officers. The diversity of participants ensured the highest-quality feedback based on a broad range of expertise and experience. It provides a valuable insight in to innovation in policing as it currently stands, the barriers that exist to it, how they may be overcome, and how a culture of innovation may be created and nurtured to the benefit of police forces and the communities they serve.

Participant feedback

'What is innovation in the context of policing?'

There was a general consensus that innovation involves improvement. Although for some this was deemed an essential criteria, without which they wouldn't class something as innovation, there was also a broad consensus that successful innovation must involve an acceptance of failure, and a willingness to learn from mistakes. It was seen as essential that it be productive, with measurable ('SMART') outputs and outcomes.

    As discussion progressed participants began to move beyond their initial conception of innovation and to recognise the broader possibilities it implied. Although much discussion originally focused on innovation primarily as the production of new ideas, as it progressed there was an increasing recognition of the potential to appropriate existing ideas (innovative or otherwise), and to implement them in innovative ways, and of the potential for processes to be innovative in and of themselves, as opposed to simply being a means of implementing innovative ideas.

    There was a recognition that innovation, in whatever form, necessitates moving outside of individual and organisational 'comfort zones', and challenging cultural and organisational conventions. Participants discussed the kind of positive challenges that innovation could pose to organisations, and seemed to see the potential for innovation to contribute to 'creative disruption'.

'What are the barriers to innovation in policing?'

The greatest barriers to innovation were considered to reside in the organisational and cultural norms of policing. In addition to highlighting the 'reactive mind-set' which (understandably) characterises much of policing, unfavourable comparisons were drawn with the private sector, in particular the lack of a 'no idea's a bad idea' attitude. The absence of this attitude was thought to discourage innovators from pursuing their ideas. Many participants identified a fear of failure within the police as a key barrier too, and an associated failure to lean from mistakes. Rather, it was considered that the police will 'gloss over' mistakes, and put a positive spin on any assessment, which inhibits their ability to learn from failures. This fear of failure was seen as a key factor in perpetuating a resistance to innovation, which may understandably be perceived as higher risk than established practices.

Part of the cultural barrier was seen to be the primacy given to experience, as opposed to research and evidence. This was considered to create a 'backward looking' culture, in which things are done because they have always been done, and not necessarily because they are the most efficient or effective things to do.

A key factor in the perpetuation of these cultural barriers was perceived to be the indoctrination of new recruits into established ways of thinking. This is thought to apply to both student officers and higher-level 'direct entry' posts. Participants considered that both groups have great potential to introduce innovation, but that this potential is not only not capitalised on, but is actively suppressed in their first years of training and duty. This was seen as particularly counter-productive in the case of direct-entry senior staff who may have been brought in from private industry specifically because of their potential to innovate and challenge established norms. The attitude of some forces to less-conventional careers paths was also highlighted as a barrier, as the resistance to career breaks are seen to inhibit the ability of officers to explore and learn from other professions and bring that learning back in to the police. This was perceived to be part of a broader ignorance of other professions and industry, and a consequent failure to engage effectively with those people outside the organisation who might have the requisite expertise to assist innovative efforts.

Financial constraints were also considered to pose a significant barrier. Not only because they impact on the adoption or development of innovative processes and technological solutions, but also because they preclude financial incentives for innovators. Of relevance to this was seen to be a fear of public and media scrutiny, which significantly inhibits organisational risk appetite, particularly with regard to any innovative and untested actions that would use public money and may prove unsuccessful. This relates back to the fear of failure discussed above. Of relevance to this is also the question of 'who holds the purse strings' as one participant termed it. Scrutiny from above, and associated political agendas were thus also seen to negatively impact on innovation, both with regard to finances and more broadly.

A point that runs contrary to the above was one participant's assertion that austerity and it's financial constraints has actually fuelled innovation by forcing police forces to think differently about what they do, and how they do it. They have been obliged to 'do more with less'. This suggests the efficiencies inherent to evidenced-based innovative ideas and practices.

'How can we create an innovative workforce of the future for policing?'

Unsurprisingly, a lot of the suggestions as to how to create an innovative workforce focused on overcoming those barriers to innovation identified earlier. For example, adopting an attitude of 'no idea's a bad idea', influencing organisational risk appetite, lessening the indoctrination of new recruits in to established patterns of thought, creating a culture of creativity, and 'celebrating failure' and learning from mistakes. Of relevance to the latter was the suggestion that forces be less afraid of press and public opinion, and have the confidence to justify their actions, celebrate their successes and

admit to their failures. Numerous participants also stressed the need for systemic processes that include implementation / integration strategies for innovative ideas.

Several participants suggested the value of a more 'networked', horizontal organisational structure, as opposed to the hierarchical framework that currently characterises forces and is thought to stifle innovation. Of relevance to this is the perceived need for a holistic approach encompassing all levels (or areas) of organisations, which would involve the acceptance and promotion of innovation among senior leaders, and engagement with the 'front line' to capture the ideas and enthusiasm of lower-level officers and staff. Integral to this would be fostering autonomy and 'creative space' for individuals to operate in, and providing officers and staff with the knowledge and tools to best utilise it. Of relevance to this is the perceived importance of fostering personal and professional development in order to nurture and enhance individual enthusiasm and ability. It was suggested that such an approach would ensure that research and innovation opportunities that are currently missed are captured and properly developed. It was also emphasised that development outcomes must be properly utilised e.g. when personality / management styles have been identified, they should be used to inform placements and further development opportunities.

One participant stressed that such an approach would need to be linked to forces' wellbeing strategies. It was emphasised that in order to foster creativity and innovation forces need to address the basic needs of staff, and ensure that they are attentive to morale, as dissatisfaction will stifle enthusiasm and innovation.

Several participants noted the importance of a coherent long-term strategy as to the forces direction, as it was considered that without this the opportunities for innovation among staff will be limited. It was considered that part of this strategic planning would need to be a re-definition of role and purpose, and the broadening of the understanding of crime from cause to symptom. Implicit in this is the recognition of the importance of partnership working, and engaging with those agencies best placed to address the broader societal issues that contribute to crime and disorder.

Conclusion

Participants engaged thoughtfully and enthusiastically in the workshop, and provided valuable insight in to the current state of innovation in policing. As noted above, as discussion progressed definitions of innovation became broader, moving beyond the relatively narrow conception of 'creative ideas' to encompass both the broader means by which they may be developed and implemented, and the borrowing of ideas and processes from other areas. What was clear from the feedback was that it is at the implementation phase that the greatest barriers exist. There seemed to be a broad consensus that it is primarily the 'culture' of policing which inhibits the processes and mechanisms through which innovation can be implemented. The impression given was very much of a surfeit of ideas and enthusiasm, and a deficit of means of expression and development.

Although some means of implementing innovation were identified (e.g. having 'front-line' staff present ideas and implementation to SLTs, or having regular meetings that celebrate, assess and learn from recent failures) for the most part discussions focused on the more abstract need to alter the culture of policing to make it more amenable to innovation. Although the need for established processes to achieve this was recognised, as well as such specific requirements as clear strategic direction and responsive and intelligent professional development, actual concrete suggestions as to how these ambitions might be realised were less evident.

It is clear that what is deemed lacking in policing is a holistic framework to facilitate innovation. It is this that the West Yorkshire Innovation Strategy seeks to realise. It represents a thoroughgoing attempt to overcome the barriers to innovation that currently exist in British policing, by creating a culture of innovation through the implementation of a holistic framework that identifies, encourages, and implements innovation at all organisational levels. By so doing it seeks to deliver increased

efficiencies, and to enhance the service provided to the communities we serve, and the experience of the officers and staff delivering that service. Ultimately it is hoped that it will provide a blueprint from which the framework for innovation may be built at regional and national levels and which will ensure that British forces lead the way in innovative, evidence-based policing.