Abstract

In the austerity era in England and Wales, both socio-economic change and shifts in the policing field have triggered a range of police reform narratives. For resource intensive manifestations of community policing, police disinvestment in England and Wales has led to
concerns of a swing away from neighbourhood security functions and proactive police work and toward crime management functions and a more reactive approach (Punch, 2012; IPC, 2013). The paper uses an institutional perspective of change in police organisations (March and Olsen, 2011; Crank, 2003) to highlight the importance of values and narratives in processes of reform, mediation, and resistance. The empirical element of the paper explores how changes in the austerity era impact on the reform and delivery of ‘Neighbourhood Policing’ and cultural storytelling in an English police force. The analysis reveals a discursive struggle over the principles and delivery of neighbourhood policing. Police in policymaking and managerial roles subscribe to narratives that suggest Neighbourhood Policing can be reformed to be more scientific, efficient, professional, and effective to counter the impact of austerity, but this is challenged by street level accounts of the impact of austerity on delivery as well as the distinctive cultural values of Neighbourhood Policing Teams.

Key words

Neighbourhood Policing, Community Policing, Austerity, Institutional Theory, Narratives, Police Culture, Police Reform

Introduction

It is difficult to speak authoritatively about contemporary police reform in England and Wales without reference to the impact of ‘austerity’ since 2010. The shock of the financial crisis in 2008 was not only a justification for departmental budgetary cuts and police disinvestment, but the resulting policy ideation was imbued with a particular logic about the necessary shape of police reform. During the 2010-2015 Parliament, the narrative from the Home Secretary was about how to make the police more efficient in the context of police disinvestment.

In the Home Office, I will be ruthless in cutting out waste, streamlining structures and improving efficiency. But these practical measures can only go so far, and together we have to make sure that - despite the cuts - policing must remain visible and available to the public... In scrapping the confidence target and the policing pledge, I couldn’t be any clearer about your mission: it isn’t a thirty-point plan; it is to cut crime. No more, and no less. (May, 2010, no page)

Whatever the primary purpose of these reforms – fiscal prudence in public service provision or policing transformation – UK politicians endeavouring to redefine the ‘real purpose’ or ‘core’ mission of policing as crime-fighting in a time of austerity has a recent precedent. In the early 1990s, the police were perceived to be expensive, ineffective, and, with an increasing number of other actors involved in policing, just one agency in an increasingly plural field of security provision. This led to a similar discussion about whether core policing...
tasks could be separated from ancillary tasks and whether the latter could be dropped or undertaken by other agencies (Mawby, 2000).

Come the twenty-first century, the political agenda had changed substantially. The preference for policing approaches that prioritised crime management functions receded and the emerging models of policing – first Reassurance Policing (RP) and then Neighbourhood Policing (NP) – prioritised neighbourhood security functions. These new models were updated manifestations of community policing, mixing both the so-called ‘soft’ and ‘hard’ aspects of policing – respectively, activities that rely on communication, negotiation, and persuasion to achieve social control on the one hand, and activities that rely on the threat or application of coercion on the other (Innes, 2005). As a model conceived and funded by central government, NP also provided a somewhat standardised approach to hyper-local and responsive policing provision. Neighbourhood Policing Teams (NPTs), were rolled out nationally in 2008, and were to include Police Community Support Officers (PCSOs) as the main delivery agents of NP. The NP model’s purpose was to trigger three delivery mechanisms - visible foot patrol, community engagement, and problem-solving activities – in order to increase confidence and reduce crime (Quinton and Morris, 2008). With the election of the Conservative-led coalition government in 2010, the onset of austerity measures, and the expiration of the ringfenced ‘Neighbourhood Policing Fund’, NP as a national programme was effectively finished (Greig-Midlane, 2014).

The former Metropolitan Police Commissioner, Lord Stevens, expressed concerns that the impact of austerity would encourage police forces to retreat away from a ‘responsive’ NP model to ‘a discredited model of reactive policing’ (IPC, 2013, p. 26). Dismissing the idea that the police can be narrowly conceived as ‘crime fighters’ – an idea forwarded by the then Home Secretary Theresa May to explain the direction of the government’s police reforms (Home Office, 2010) – Stevens promoted the idea that the police have a broad social mission and ‘civic purpose’; namely improving ‘safety and well-being within communities and promoting measures to prevent crime, harm and disorder’ (IPC, 2013, p. 14). This concern is also echoed by Punch (2012), who suggests that the macro shifts in the austerity era cause police practices and organisational rhetoric to oscillate towards crime management functions and ‘high policing’ (see Brodeur, 1983) and away from the service-oriented style of community policing programmes.

This paper will explore the reform processes taking place in this particular manifestation of community policing in England and Wales. Data from a multi-method case study of NP reform in the West Midlands will be analysed to explore the changes and continuities taking place in the austerity era. The main focus in this paper will be on the institutional narratives of policing delivery and reform, encompassing accounts of contemporary NP delivery and the impact of socio-economic shifts on as well the understanding of and attitudes towards ongoing reform projects. An assumption of this study is that institutional culture, values, and narratives are important mediators of reform and reveal the potential for change and resistance to change. Moreover, police reform is a complex social activity, impacted by
exogenous shocks, socio-economic shifts, technological development, political agendas, relationships with ‘partners’ (agencies, civilians, and community groups), and demands for service. Narratives are a window into how police actors and other constituents make sense of this institutional environment with a view to mediating reform and implementing policy. Therefore, this paper is guided by the questions:

1. How do police make sense of neighbourhood policing delivery in the austerity era?
2. What do police narratives in the West Midlands reveal about contemporary neighbourhood policing reform processes and the negotiation of institutional change?

As stories about policing do not develop in a vacuum, the first section of this paper will examine the austerity era shifts in the police institutional environment in England and Wales, first looking at socio-economic developments associated with austerity and neoliberal governance and then considering the recent changes to the ‘field’ of policing – that is, ‘a social space of conflict and competition’ (Chan, 1996, p. 115) in which formal rules and governance come into contact with the realities of police work. The second section outlines an institutional approach to understanding how values and narratives impact reform and implementation. Cultural narratives are highlighted as an important mediator of reforms. The paper then presents the context and design of the empirical component, before analysing the data generated in fieldwork and discussing the findings. The empirical findings will explore the changes and continuities in NP in the austerity era.

Context of reforms

Austerity and the surround

The idea of austerity refers most plainly to public sector cuts, especially those that fall directly on police institutions. Yet understanding austerity in this narrow and formulaic sense limits discussion to the effect of austerity on material resources and the direct impact of falling resources in the public sector on service delivery. Consequently, this omits the logic (Blyth, 2013), wider processes, and rhetoric of austerity politics (Bramall et al., 2016). ‘The austerity era’, therefore, can be broadly defined as a political and socio-economic backdrop to, and potentially influential variable in, policing reforms and change. Manning (2008, p. 87) dubs this domain of socio-economic influence as the ‘surround’, which is the ‘larger political forces in a city or a nation’ and encircles the ‘field’.

Since the 1970s the dominance of neoliberal economics and practices across economically developed countries has been cited as the basis for a number of market-oriented reform programmes in the public sector (Peck, 2010) and beyond (Berry, 2016), and the politics of public finances play a role in how these reforms are justified (Grimshaw and Rubery, 2012; 2015; Grimshaw, 2013a; 2013b). While neoliberal reform agendas may be an ideological rather than pragmatic reaction to economic shocks and public sector deficits, fiscal crises can provide the political justification for these reforms and ideological agendas (Reiner
2013). For example, the current austerity era has been described as a deliberate attempt to fundamentally change the social model of the UK from ‘liberal collectivism’ to a ‘market society’ (Grimshaw and Rubery, 2015; 2012; Grimshaw, 2015; 2013). This change is accompanied by public sector reforms that ‘impose a downwards quantitative adjustment in activity, involve transferring activity to the private sector and... the ending of [some] service provision’ (Grimshaw, 2013, p. 576). This is not to reduce all policy actors to a single and coherent ideology, as the reform programmes of the Conservative-led Coalition government – such as David Cameron’s ‘Big Society’ and Theresa May’s localism – were less ideologically coherent and form an ‘eclectic mix’ of traditions (Lowndes and Pratchett, 2011; see also Loader, 2014). In contrast, Morgan (2012) maintains that the overall policy programme of the Conservatives, the more powerful partner in the coalition, used both ideas of the big society and localism to justify the same policies, which are broadly commensurate with neoliberal logic. In other words, neoliberal approaches to governance dominate the contemporary surround and may influence the possibilities for action in public services through the imposition of an economic policy agenda across government departments.

Changes in the field

Against this surround of the austerity era, a number of more specific changes to the policing field have taken place in recent decades. This includes the official fall in overall crime, the changing nature of crime and police demand (College of Policing, 2015; Hales and Higgins, 2016), policing of and for vulnerable populations (Bartkowiak-Théron and Asquith, 2012; Keay and Kirby, 2017), policing (de)specialisation (Innes 2014), policing in the digital era (Wall, 2003; Wall and Williams, 2007; Wessels, 2007), new governance and accountability arrangements (Loader 2014; Lister and Rowe 2015), and the evidence-based policing and professionalization movements (Sherman, 2011; Holdaway, 2017).

Impact of governance

Loader (2014) suggests that the austerity era has provided political conditions for an ambitious reform agenda to a public body that has until recently avoided the enforced changes to other public services, including the ‘unfinished business’ of attempted police reform in the 1990s. These conditions include a lack of strong organised opposition from police bodies, a stronger government, and bad publicity from the Leveson press enquiry (Loader, 2014) and other public scandals (Innes, 2014). Furthermore, before recent rises in offences involving knives or sharp instruments (ONS, 2019), disinvestment in the police had been an easier political choice in an era when government could annually cite falling crime rates, as has largely been the case in England and Wales since 1996 (Innes, 2014). As numerous studies have shown, portraying the role of the police as ‘crime-fighters’ is empirically inaccurate and does not convey the broadness and complexity of police work (Banton, 1964; Bittner, 1970; Cain 1973; Clarke and Hough, 1984; Bayley, 1994; Ericson, 1994; Manning, 1997; Waddington, 1999; Flanagan, 2008; Charman, 2018), yet in 2011 the police’s only objective was defined as crime reduction by the then Home Secretary Theresa May, which manifested itself in the removal of all other central targets for police
organisations in England and Wales (Loader, 2014). Redefining the (core) police role as crime reduction has meant that the government can claim that police disinvestment, resulting in reduced police resources and fewer police officers, are justified while the overall crime rate falls, while simultaneously attempting to sate the public desire for ever more ‘bobbies on the beat’ through claims that a higher proportion of police now work on the so-called ‘front line’ and that the Neighbourhood Policing workforce increased by 3,800 officers – even though these claims are potentially misleading (Millie, 2014; Greig-Midlane, 2015).

Additional to these more assertive moves, post-2010 policing has also seen the creation of Police and Crime Commissioners (PCCs) and the accompanying move from a tripartite to quadripartite structure (Lister and Rowe, 2015). In particular and in light of debates around the efficacy of the PCSO role (O’Neill, 2014; cf. Loveday and Smith, 2015), PCCs have had to make decisions not only regarding their support of the NP model and ‘bobbies on the beat’, but also on the question of the provision and retention of PCSOs as part of existing or future local policing arrangements.

De-specialisation and the division of labour

The question of what will happen to police visibility and in turn public confidence is particularly keen when the police workforce is falling or is likely to fall due to disinvestment (Barker and Crawford, 2013), but the NP architecture is also threatened in other ways. NP is in one sense a policing specialisation, created in an era where public policing was organised into a number of specialist domains – such as response, detection, drugs enforcement, and neighbourhood – and this way of organising policing is under threat from the need for stretched police organisations to deploy resources more flexibly. This could lead to a new era of de-specialisation and the fostering of a broader range of policing skills (Innes 2014), which represents a shift away from the ‘reinvention of the constable’ as a ‘community leader’ back to an ‘omni-functional generalist’ (Savage, 2007). PCSOs, on the other hand, are one manifestation of pluralisation and hybridity, where the policing division of labour is divided by a host of different agencies, actors and police roles (Johnston, 2003; Crawford and Lister, 2004; Manning, 2014; Brodeur, 2010). Reforms made in the austerity era could impact the direction of these trends, particularly if a cheaper patrolling option, public or private, can replace the PCSO without resistance (Loveday and Smith, 2015; Barker and Crawford, 2013). Though PCSOs were once thought to represent ‘policing on the cheap’, the PCSO workforce has been falling since 2010 due to new approaches to local policing models (Greig-Midlane, 2014) and the PCSO status as staff rather than warranted officer, meaning they can be made redundant (O’Neill, 2014). Furthermore, although there was an uplift in the voluntary workforce of Special Constables across England and Wales between 2010-2014 (Greig-Midlane, 2014), this recruitment drive did not last and the workforce reduced nationally in the second half (Greig-Midlane, forthcoming), potentially due to difficulties in retention coupled with the initial costs of recruitment (Callender et al., 2018).
Internal police reforms are also influenced by austerity, as organisations must make operational decisions within the constraints of changing financial environments as well as the range of contemporary political pressures. The main regulatory bodies of public policing in England and Wales – Her Majesty's Inspectorate of Constabulary and Fire & Rescue Services (HMICFRS – formerly HMIC) and the College of Policing – have had the challenge of identifying and analysing challenges for the delivery of policing in the context of disinvestment and shrinking police resources. One of these challenges is the change in demand for police services, both in terms of overall increases and the changing character of demand, which is currently seen as the increase in complex cases and sexual offences. This had led to the pronouncement of two crucial problems for police organisations: managing demand (College of Policing, 2015) and dealing with vulnerability (HMIC, 2017).

The idea of ‘managing demand’ – or ‘reducing demand’ – refers to the process of police organisations prioritising declining resources in order to cover the areas of police work that are deemed to be most important to fulfilling their mandate (Hales and Higgins, 2016). Falling police resources and diminished centralised governance has catalysed urgent debates about the police role in contemporary society. In some cases, demand may be generated by high public expectations of the capacity of public services to deal with a growing range of issues (Fleming and Grabosky, 2009). The New Labour reform agenda can be seen as an example of this, as the police remit was broadened through antisocial behaviour legislation (Millie, 2008) and the encouragement of a customer service ethos as part of new public management reforms (Fleming and Grabosky, 2009) – though this ethos likely had a limited impact on police attitudes and practice (Westmarland, 2010). This idea of an excessive remit relates to one obvious method of reducing demand; redefining what demands are reasonable for police with finite resources. There is, however, an alternative (or complementary) method; understanding how to prevent crime and intervene in the lives of those who are considered to be at risk of offending/being victimised. This can be conceptualised as reducing ‘failure demand’, which is any demand that is caused by an earlier failure. In the case of policing, this would include not preventing crime from taking place or not dealing with other criminogenic or other demand-producing risks – currently referred to collectively as ‘upstream’ (Walley and Jennison-Phillips, 2017).

The importance placed on vulnerability - which relates to areas such as mental health, youth, child sexual exploitation, victims of trafficking, and intimate partner and honour based violence (Asquith et al., 2017) – was evident when in 2016 the College of Policing conference was themed ‘Vulnerability – new approaches, better outcomes’ (College of Policing, 2016), in which the then Home Secretary Amber Rudd said that vulnerability was “one of the most pressing issues facing policing today, and... one of my priorities” (Rudd, 2016, no page). Vulnerability appears to be high on the policing agenda in the austerity era as there is a concern that vulnerable people increasingly face a lack of police service
provision (HMIC, 2017). In keeping with the dominant reform agendas, HMIC made the following claim:

This state of affairs strengthens the case for more efficient ways of working; by working more efficiently, forces will be able to do more to protect people, even in the face of reduced resources. (HMIC, 2017, p. 18)

New delivery methods for policing of and with vulnerable people often revolve around spatial analysis. That is, to implement practical responses to vulnerability, police organisations attempt to ascertain who is vulnerable, divide populations and places into categories of risk, and guide police practitioners (Bartkowiak-Théron and Asquith, 2012). The idea of vulnerability is important to NP delivery as these issues and the way police organisations deal with them can affect the prioritisation of resources across different spaces (Bartkowiak-Théron and Asquith, 2015). In other words, different neighbourhoods or other geographical areas can be designated as places of higher risk, NP resources distributed accordingly and differential policing of neighbourhoods based on vulnerability risk factors encouraged, just as with crime.

These approaches fit with the recent developments that Holdaway (2017) refers to as the ‘re-professionalization’ of policing, which involves integrating scientific principles and ‘a body of authoritative knowledge’ (Neyroud, 2011, p. 44) into police practice and the creation of a new regulatory system and an independent yet accountable professional policing body, the College of Policing. Traditionally, the philosophy of community policing had been presented as an antithesis to the professionalised, bureaucratic model of policing (Manning, 1984), so there are some elements of these approaches that are in tension with some of the symbolic functions of policing that are valued by community policing and its manifestations, such as social closeness and reassurance, and this new environment could present NP operatives with new challenges in delivering NP.

Police institutional values and narratives

Contemporary police institutions are public bodies that are an essential part of the modern state apparatus. These bodies contain structures and formal rules that attempt to guide behaviour and produce defined outcomes, but they are also socially organised by the actions of individuals and groups. Institutionalism seeks to study and theorise the ‘relations between institutional characteristics and political agency, performance, and change’ (March and Olsen, 2011, p. 160), as the structural components of institutions are intended to be translated into political action. Some other fundamental premises of institutional theory are that:

...institutions create elements of order and predictability. They fashion, enable, and constrain political actors as they act within a logic of appropriate action. Institutions are carriers of identities and roles and they
are markers of a polity’s character, history, and visions. (March and Olsen, 2011, p. 160)

Accordingly, police institutions are often resistant to reform (Skogan, 2008), such as those that attempt to redesign organisations in the image of a profit-making business and apply economic concepts to a public service institution (Crank, 2003; Manning, 2001). This is because the police are institutionalised organisations that perform ‘value work’, and police organisations and officers (and other staff) must embody the institutional values within the design of the organisation and the tasks they perform, respectively (Crank, 2003). Crank argues that values are ‘foundational to the police. Organizational behavior, culture, and structure become sensible in terms of the values of members and constituencies’ (2003, p. 187). The external and internal constituents of the police help shape the institution because public bodies seek both internal and external support for their values and goals. Bouma’s (1998) view is that this normative context is the essential feature of an institution, distinguishing the broader institution from the subordinate organisation, which itself is shaped by and helps to reproduce the institution by conforming to these norms.

Firstly, this tells us that meaningful change in police organisations is difficult and attempts at reform are limited by institutional values. This does not mean, however, that change is impossible or does not take place (Marks, 2000), but rather that there are stabilising features of public institutions in stable societies.1 Secondly, it suggests that meaningful institutional change, rather than during technical changes to the organisation, is when the normative context of the institution is altered. This then relates to the potential for organisational change because an institutionalised organisation attempts to work within this normative context, influencing which types of reforms can be successful according to their history and social goals.

Periods of crisis provide opportunities for such an alteration through ideational change. Carstensen (2017) highlights the role of policymakers in reinterpreting institutional elements after exogenous shocks. According to Carstensen, this is a pragmatic way of reframing existing or previous policies that, due to their familiar objectives and values, are more likely to resonate with institutional culture and logics of action. The (re)framing process should also include not just the decisions of policymakers, but also the way that reform is communicated within institutions – through, for example, rhetorically framed stories (Schön and Rein, 1994) – and policy implementation, or how these new policies, guidelines, and stories are negotiated at the street level (Klinger, 1997).

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1 The opposite may be true for unstable societies. Through studying police change in the transitional society of post-apartheid South Africa, Marks argues that police transformation is constant precisely because “police organisations are under constant pressure to realign themselves to changing political, social and economic environments” (2000, p. 146).
All constituents of an institution are involved in policy (re)framing and negotiation. Constituents tell old and refined stories to make sense of new events and make ‘on-going reinterpretations of culturally sacred storylines’ (Boje, 1995, p. 106). Stories of new events are in competition for recognition as an accepted, or dominant, narrative, and these discursive struggles can influence how reforms are enacted or resisted. Näslund and Pemer (2011) suggest that the dominant narrative within an organisation constrains the range of new stories of reform and the potential for change. In policing, this is perhaps complicated by cultural divisions between management and street level police (Reuss-Ianni, 1983) as well as between the traditional, crime control-oriented culture and the new cultures found in particular groups, roles, and specialisms (Loftus, 2009; O’Neill and McCarthy, 2013; Bacon, 2014; Cosgrove, 2016; Macaulay and Rowe, 2019). Police culture(s) can both resist and produce change in police institutions, but institutional change likely comes in times of changes to the policing field (Chan, 1996). Although institutional values may contribute to inertia, cultural values may be renegotiated through the deployment of new narratives and sensemaking processes (Macaulay and Rowe, 2019).

To conclude this section, reform is a complex social process, impacted by external shocks and the institutional environment. The impact of ideational and structural change should be integrated into a wider institutional understanding of policing change; one that appreciates how rhetoric, stories, culture, and interaction are arenas of mediation, negotiation, and resistance. These arenas are embedded in the structural and are sites of both deliberate and unintentional policy implementation. For policymakers, an integrated understanding is useful to understand the potential for and limits of change, and an institutional perspective highlights the importance of institutional values, which include both internal and external constituents. However, even these categories – internal and external – potentially contain further divisions; institutions are sites of both conflict and consensus. These rhetorical and interactional struggles are part of the negotiation of social change (Fine and Hallett, 2014; Lyons, 1999).

Change and continuity in an English police force

This section will briefly outline the research setting, the sample and the methods employed in data generation. This study is based on the data generated from a more wide-ranging doctoral thesis, which gives further information about the methodology and research design (Greig-Midlane, forthcoming). West Midlands Police (WMP) was chosen as a research setting due to a mixture of fairly typical workforce change in England and Wales (see Greig-Midlane, 2014) and a number of purposeful reform agendas in the austerity era. Table 1 shows how WMP operational workforces have changed in the austerity era.
### Workforce Change in West Midlands Police, March 2010-September 2018

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<td>811</td>
<td>8.1%</td>
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<td>2018</td>
<td>452</td>
<td>6.3%</td>
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<td>Change</td>
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**National Average**

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<td>-42.1%</td>
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*Proportion of operational workforce (Officers, PCSOs, Specials)

**National Average includes all 43 territorial police forces in England and Wales.

| Table 1 - Workforce Change in West Midlands Police, Source: Home Office Police Service Strength data tables |

From 2009, WMP started the first of a number of organisational reform programmes, *Programme Paragon*, which aimed to improve public confidence, enhance partnership working, and reduce overall costs. Paragon reduced the number of policing divisions from twenty-one ‘Operational Command Units’ to ten ‘Local Policing Units’ (LPUs). These new units are coterminous with local authority boundaries, and this arrangement was expected to simplify cooperation with other agencies. From 2012, the Continuous Improvement programme aimed to reduce waste, duplication and inefficiency in the force’s systems and processes. As part of the reorganisation, NPTs would now require fewer staff to be dedicated to their LPU, but with fewer abstractions to other teams. NPT functions would now include offender management and tackling gangs and organised crime, whereas Response Teams would focus solely on responding to incidents and not investigations (West Midlands Police Authority and WMP, 2012).

In light of ongoing budgetary cuts, the Chief Constable decided to pursue a new organisational change programme in 2015. This reorganisation was dubbed *WMP 2020*, and NP was again ‘a critical element’ of the reforms. The ‘WMP 2020 Blueprint’ promised a new NP model that is ‘not constrained by geographical boundaries’, would focus resources in the ‘areas of most need’, and develop ‘active citizens’ – an attempt to improve methods of ‘connecting and working with local people to share information’ (WMP, 2015). Other planned features of the programme were an increase in digital services, making greater use of new technologies to improve various tasks, and a greater focus on prevention of victimisation, harm, and reoffending.

**Method and sample**

Semi-structured interviews were chosen as the most practical method to gain individual accounts of NP delivery and reform. I conducted face-to-face semi-structured interviews
(n=21) with eighteen street-level NPT operatives, as well as three elite police actors who were involved in some capacity with high-level NP policy. The former group was formed of one inspector, six sergeants, five PCs, and six PCSOs who were currently working or had until recently worked in NPTs in WMP. The latter comprised WMP’s PCC, a WMP Chief Superintendent who was the lead for local policing, and the College of Policing’s lead on local policing. The elite group also included an email interview (n=1) with the Assistant Chief Constable (ACC) at WMP who oversaw local policing policy. A face-to-face interview was not possible with the ACC due to her own time constraints, and instead she offered to answer a set amount of questions via email.

The interview data was coded into various themes. The analytical approach was adaptive (Layder, 1998), as some of these codes were data driven and others were influenced by the NP literature. Four major themes are presented in this paper in the following analysis to illustrate the values encapsulated in narratives of reform and maintenance of NP as well as the difficulties in reforming and maintaining NP delivery in austerity era.

Rethinking delivery in a changing field

In the austerity era, the notion of what NP is and how it should be delivered is being challenged. These challenges emerge from shifts in the policing field, force-level reforms, and new stories of policing reform. These new reform narratives are the first focus of this analysis and represent efforts to make sense of delivering NP in the austerity era, with fewer resources and a shifting field. Before the austerity era, New Labour’s NP programme combined a number of reform initiatives that sought to increase confidence, increase policing activities that would ‘reassure’ the public, and be responsive to community demands (Povey, 2001; Innes, 2005; McLaughlin, 2005; Fleming and McLaughlin, 2012). The tactic of visible patrol was the lynchpin of these reforms as it represents a symbolically powerful aspect of policing (Loader and Mulcahy, 2003; Greig-Midlane, 2014) and was one of the key delivery mechanisms for increasing confidence (Quinton and Morris, 2008).

High level police actors, both in WMP and in other policing bodies, are now questioning the idea of visibility due to shifts in social behaviour and criminal activity associated with the online realm.

**College of Policing Local Policing Lead:** I think the landscape around crime is changing, so what is the relevance of a PCSO walking past a thirteen-year old’s bedroom window when actually the thirteen-year-old probably doesn’t leave that bedroom and is online potentially being groomed? How does visibility work now in an age where more and more crime and risk are probably online and virtual? The relevance of that visibility, I think, has changed.

**Chief Superintendent:** The example I give is around the traditional neighbourhood policing of the PCSO or the PC walking past somebody’s
front window wearing a yellow jacket, they feel reassured by that and their car’s probably not going to go off the drive tonight, but your 13 year-old daughter’s upstairs, online, being groomed. So it’s a different sort of risk, it’s a different sort of reassurance we need to think about. It’s a different sort of presence in a neighbourhood we need to think about. And that’s the challenge I think for the work we’re going to do into the future.

These two excerpts show a particular narrative that promotes reforming the tactic of visible patrol and rethinking the concepts of reassurance and visibility. In this case, the challenge is to transition from a pure street-based visible presence to an extra digital presence that can deal with new and potentially complex crimes. Stories that resonate with police cultures – in this case a ‘management cop culture’ and ideology of professionalisation (Reuss-Ianni, 1983; Crank et al. 1993) – are repeated and used as a resource to identify current problems in the policing field and solutions. The current digital age combined with disinvestment has catalysed a particular type of ideation among high-level police actors that considers traditional policing functions to require technological reform. Rhetoric about the efficacy of reducing visibility and increasing digital tactics of policing was rare amongst PCs and PCSOs in the study, reflecting the management-street cop division on this issue noted in previous studies (Reuss-Ianni, 1983; Crank et al. 1993).

More generally, the concepts of visibility and reassurance are losing the relevance they once had under previous policy agendas and targets. Since 2010, for NP to be ‘effective’ in meeting the Home Office’s single target of reducing crime, it must focus more on crime control and less on confidence building and reassuring the public.

Chief Superintendent: I think there’s a real debate around what reassurance really is, and we do a lot of reassurance visits, but actually as we’ve started to unpick that we’re saying, “well why are we doing this? Are they particularly effective?” ... I think that your traditional reassurance, engagement and problem-solving is still as relevant now and will be in the future. I think the one that is up for debate is the reassurance piece.

Reassurance is identified here as the lowest priority aspect of neighbourhood security, whereas engagement and problem-solving are more easily conceived as core policing work. This points to a division in how different aspects of neighbourhood security are valued by different police actors, as well as what it means to be ‘effective’. In these reform narratives, ‘effectiveness’ refers largely to crime management objectives. Neighbourhood security functions that are more easily conceived of as effective in crime control are valued by these high-level actors.
Science versus craft

For more senior police actors, there is a widening appeal of integrating an evidence base and using scientific means to professionalise practice and improve effectiveness (Hunter et al., 2019), and in this study some NP operatives also supported these narratives and developments. This sergeant, for example, reflects the notion that the need to reform NP in order to forge a scientific and efficient approach is exacerbated by austerity:

**Sergeant 1:** I don’t think us coming on duty and knocking on people’s doors saying hello and having tea stops everywhere – that’s nice, but if we’re not delivering the service because we’ve got less of us, then that isn’t what… I think the way forward is, you know, the discussions I’ve just had about being scientific with our approach, having tight timescales, deploy resources to those timescales, make sure they’re disciplined and rigid so we stick to those timescales to have maximum impact. I think that’s the way forward rather than just employing a load of officers who will just go around, doing what they want, walking wherever they want and not having a real approach to what we’re doing and then not being able to measure what we’re doing.

The sergeant presents the interpersonal work of NP operatives as ‘nice’ but not a ‘real approach’, resembling earlier perceptions of NP work as ‘nice to do but not essential’ (Foster and Jones, 2010, p. 395) and lacking professionalism. The ‘rigid’ approach and measurable activity favoured by this sergeant reflects a management culture that is amenable to aspects of the evidence-based policing movement and the new professionalisation (Holdaway, 2017; Hunter et al., 2019). However, these values also contrast with many of the activities and values associated with the NP programme (O’Neill and McCarthy, 2013; McCarthy, 2014) and community policing more broadly (Fielding, 1995; Manning, 1984; Holdaway, 1977). The following quotation is an example of a counter-narrative to the scientification and professionalisation of police work (Ericson and Shearing, 1986; Ericson, 1994; Crank et al. 1993) and reveals a perceived divide between the values of management and street level operatives:

**CSO3:** I think recently, some of the senior officers did actually come out with neighbourhood police officers and they’re surprised in what we’ve done. You can’t normally quantify it and measure it up against a response team, where you’ve got so many officers, you crime so many things, and being able to identify who’s the offender in these things. Whereas neighbourhood policing, just by being a presence, walking past someone when they’re going in with their shopping, they must feel more reassured.

In contrast with the reform narratives that highlight reassurance as an ineffective and outdated aspect of neighbourhood security, this PCSO still values the impact of visible
presence on reassurance. Furthermore, the idea of measuring outcomes is perceived as more relevant to detection than prevention and represents a threat to the craft of NP.

Preventing demand

NP has been described as a police organisational arrangement to encourage ‘soft’ policing initiatives (McCarthy, 2014, p.261) that involve fostering connection to communities and collaborating with partners to solve neighbourhood problems. At the same time, others have observed that NP work is affected by the dominant, ‘hard’ notions and priorities of police work (Bullock and Leeney, 2013; Cosgrove and Ramshaw, 2015; Cosgrove, 2016) and that ‘hard and soft policing forms are enacted concurrently’ (Innes, 2005, p. 157). The distinction between the orthodox crime management and the neighbourhood security missions is understood by police through the lens of short-term versus long-term solutions to crime problems. NPT operatives sometimes use the ‘sticking-plaster’ metaphor to describe how the approach of Response Teams is not concerned with causes of crime and long-term solutions:

PC2: ...to be a good neighbourhood officer you've got to take the plaster off, because Response put a plaster on it and you've got to try and get to the root of what is actually the problem.

This orientation toward proactive and preventative policing distinguishes NP from the ‘firefighting’ approach of response policing and highlights the notion of neighbourhood problems that potentially lead to multiple or ongoing incidents of crime and disorder. It is this aspect of NP that is emphasised in the reform narratives of senior management, especially through the notion of ‘demand management/reduction’.

The issue of demand has emerged in the austerity era as a critical factor to be managed in order to mitigate the impact of disinvestment (College of Policing, 2015). In WMP, senior police actors envisage NP reforms that bolster proactive and preventative activities:

Assistant Chief Constable: The Neighbourhood policing model we are designing for the future is key to reducing organisational demand. It is not about reducing demand in isolation, it is about tackling vulnerability in line with core policing values through sophisticated early intervention and a model of citizen engagement which activates citizens and galvanises communities to build their own resilience to tackle issues from within.

Chief Superintendent: You get the spin offs with that around the ability to deal with local priorities, a more focused approach around vulnerability and antisocial behaviour and some of the crime management and problem

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2 Loftus (2009) argues that in police institutions the traditional, street-level police cultural characteristics are still ‘dominant’.
solving. But I think that was then, and the trick now is we want to make sure we’re getting far more preventative and we are getting better at managing demand earlier.

These narratives emphasise existing elements of NP, including the focus on antisocial behaviour and community engagement, but also refer to the contemporary framings of vulnerability and demand management. For senior police actors, NP is now described as an approach that reduces demand through prevention, co-production, and problem solving rather than the interpersonal work that is still valued by some street level operatives.

**NPT1 Sergeant:** I think we're sinking a little bit and we've got to have the strength of character to say, "It's not really for us". Because I'd rather have cops chasing burglars and the offences that cause us the most harm – burglars, people who rob old ladies or do destruction thefts or cybercrime, paedophilia or whatever is going on out there – than frankly dealing with a cat having its mess thrown over the fence and spending hours dealing with that. I think our priorities are somewhat amiss at times because we don't have the heart to say no.

Concepts of vulnerability, threat, and harm challenge some of the concepts associated with British community policing, NP and the doctrine of consent, such as visibility, reassurance, confidence, community outreach, and familiarity. In some sense, it is the tactics that might achieve ‘social closeness’ that are (sometimes uneasily) being challenged by these new ideas of NP delivery. This is linked to a sense that the police have ‘created demand’ that is excessive and unnecessary to fulfil the police’s remit. Not only is reducing demand about prevention, but also doing less and retreating from work that goes beyond a sense of ‘core duties’.

The constraints of austerity

Whether the police actors valued reform or maintenance of the NP model, most agreed that delivering and deliberately reforming NP is difficult due to falling resources. One of the more pressing issues for WMP at the time of fieldwork was a planned 78% reduction of the PCSO workforce (BBC News, 2015). Although this drastic change did not materialise when the Home Office changed policy and protected the police budget in late 2015, overall funding for WMP would rise only slightly in the 2015-2019 period (Home Office, 2018) and the PCSO workforce continued to decline (see figure 1). The loss of PCSOs arguably represents a decline in the ability of police forces to deliver NP and certain neighbourhood security functions (Greig-Midlane, 2014; O’Neill, 2014).
Figure 1 - PCSO Workforce Change, 2004-September 2018. Source: Home Office.

PCSOs are valued by managers because they are expected to remain geographically fixed in a neighbourhood when officer resources are abstracted, which in turn allows them to be a more constant visible presence and conduit of information.

NPT2 Sergeant: I think they’re invaluable, I really do, and I think they are going to be very sadly missed. They are the eyes and ears. I feel that people are in the communities in my experience of neighbourhood policing are more inclined to tell a PCSO information than sometimes a constable. In terms of intelligence gathering, I think they’re invaluable. People tell them so much. They’ve got the time and they are not abstracted in the same way the constable is. They are not going to be sent to certain jobs. Like for example, when response, on a late shift in particular, are absolutely strapped and they’ve got no one else to send...

The PCSO workforce is important, then, for the neighbourhood security function largely due to their relatively stable presence and capacity for reassurance. New gaps in this workforce are difficult to plug, due to the demands of response leading to warranted NP operatives being abstracted from their assigned neighbourhoods. The impact that workforce reductions have on visibility, and relatedly confidence, is a major concern for management too:
Chief Superintendent: I think there’s a huge risk anyway because the interpretation of anything to do with the cuts, the fact that this is a programme of change to improve West Midlands police is almost an irrelevance to many members of the community, because what they will see is £125 million of cuts, which equals neighbourhood policing going. We won’t see any officers on the beat, and so on. At the moment I don’t think we can offer in confidence what the alternative is. So it’s back to that invisibility, accessibility, presence in a neighbourhood in different ways.

This demonstrates an appreciation of the limits of change programmes in the context of austerity. Change can effectively be unintentional if resource levels, rather than policy-making, drive people’s experiences of service delivery. While policing rhetoric and ideation may be developing to account for the new policing surround, changes to police work and specifically NP delivery are not necessarily in harmony with rhetorical shifts.

The austerity era also threatens NP delivery as there is less time to nurture relationships with community members and breed familiarity:

NPT1 CSO1: I think it was much better when, as I say, we had the numbers to focus on our areas. I would have a beat which was [place in neighbourhood] and that would be my beat. I would be able to pop in to the elderly care homes, pop in to the schools more often, and you’d know people on first name terms but now I can’t actually do that as much. Obviously, you stop going into places because you can’t be there, and obviously that personal connection goes, doesn’t it? Whereas before you’d pop in and you’d say, “Oh, I’ve seen this, I’ve seen this.” You now go in for two weeks and people fluctuate, people move out and you walk in there’s a new manager. “Oh, I don’t know who you are.” And then the connections are lost basically.

PC1: It’s lack of availability and officers’ wastage in our resources. We are really skimming the surface now. It’s the lack of in depth we’re able to provide. Before you were able to go to speak to two, three people or members in your community in a diner, you got so much intelligence over one cup of tea. Now as an individual officer on a neighbourhood... we don’t get time to do anything like that. We technically are a response type. We just don’t attend immediates, but we do everything as early response like sort of call outs. We have built that relationship. The relationship building is gone. It’s not gone for the better, it’s gone for the worse, purely because of the numbers being cut down.

Many NPT operatives value interpersonal work and rapport as a core part of confidence building and information gathering but, along with visibility, maintaining the levels of these
activities is difficult. Street level police actors report that the relationships they have built in the past are no longer as strong. Community policing reforms aim to reduce ‘social distance’ between the police and public (Innes, 2004), in part by building on this interpersonal work and the focus on community collaboration, but this is a resource intensive approach not suited to times of disinvestment.

Discussion and conclusions

There is reason to think that the success of police reform can be aided by the use of stories that resonate with occupational and group cultures. Senior management in institutions may attempt to change occupational identities through narratives that legitimate existing orders or reforms, but these can be resisted by occupational narratives (Humphreys and Brown, 2002). This is a complex process due to intra-institutional conflicts; stories may be rejected if they do not reflect particular values, but they may be accepted by others. In this study, different stories about NP and reform draw upon understandings of police institutional values to either support change or express apprehension and condemnation of incoming reforms. Furthermore, some stories may be culturally dominant in institutions or in groups. The existence of dominant stories, if opposing change, may restrict sensemaking and lead to institutional inertia (Näslund and Pemer, 2011; Geiger and Antonacopoulou, 2009). In NPTs, the street-level narratives tend to support the new cultural dispositions of NP, but this is complicated by the existence of stories that may have more institutional dominance due to the support of higher status individuals – i.e. senior and middle managers, especially sergeants – and the traditional occupational culture (Skolnick, 1966; Reiner, 2000; Loftus, 2009).

The plurality of stories within policing could mean that policing is currently more open to sensemaking processes and the potential change that these bring. While the new cultural stories of NP are influenced by current NP structures and recent policing history, stories about demand reduction and retreating to the ‘core’ functions of crime reduction are likely triggered by the fiscal environment and supported by central government and the police regulatory bodies. According to Holdaway, the new loosely coupled structure of police regulation supports the re-professionalisation of policing, and through the College of Policing this includes the establishment of a ‘corpus of knowledge about what works in policing’ (2017, p. 597) and standards for effective and ethical police action. The role of the College in particular represents a vehicle for knowledge production, ideation, and storytelling in policing, and it is likely that this plays a part in informing stories and sensemaking in NPTs, especially regarding reforms and change. In the face of these changes in an already complex world, nostalgia for the past is an act of resistance (Reissner, 2011).

Analysis of police institutional change after trigger events must pay attention to cultural and individual mediation in order to understand the impact of the shock on policing delivery, or the causal mechanism of a trigger event on policy action. Exogenous shocks can act as a trigger for policy decisions, but these new policy decisions may amount to re-ordering
existing institutional ideas and policies in order to resonate with institutional values and standards for action (Carstensen, 2017). However, conflict in institutions means that particular values and standards will most likely be emphasised over others. In this scenario, cultural conflict means that there will be more occupational resistance and perhaps more protracted processes of sensemaking taking place before meaningful change can happen.

The findings of this study support the idea of socio-economic forces influencing both change and continuity in NP in the austerity era. Some of the programmatic elements of NP may have been diluted or removed in WMP and other police forces, but the social organisation of police work appears to be relatively stable. For all the structural changes, reform efforts, and difficulties associated with squeezed resources that may be linked to an attempted change in the UK social model (Grimshaw and Rubery, 2015), there are enduring features of policing that form the basis of NP delivery and organisation and will likely continue in new models of local policing delivery. The new ideation within forces, including professionalisation and demand reduction narratives, is limited by the impact of the surround and the field, new cultural values in NPTs, and interactions with external constituents.

Finally, it must be noted that the contemporary political order in the UK appears to be relatively unstable in the context of both austerity and the plans to end the UK’s membership of the European Union. As I type, police forces and the newly formed National Policing Board are attempting to increase the police workforce by 20,000 officers in the next three years to partially make up for workforce losses since 2010, catalysed by a recent change in Conservative Party leader and Prime Minister. Time will now tell whether this ambitious promise can be delivered and police investment rise. For NP, however, there is no guarantee that the impact of the austerity era in the past nine years will be reversed.

References


