

Developing the workforce, culture and capabilities for the future in a post COVID-19 environment

People, tech and resources

Reflections on the Cityforum 2020 Policing Series written by David Shaw

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Principal Thought Leadership Partner



Foreword

In the last year the world has experienced major upheaval as it has responded to the first pandemic of the technology age. The impact on life has been monumental and the knock-on impact within business communities has enforced significant change on the way we communicate and commerce.

Within the Policing community the speed of this change has been impressive as forces have balanced the inherent risk of information security with the requirement to adopt a more flexible and agile approach to remote working. The speed of this response had been testament to the visionary work of the NPTC, NEP and PICTCo in enabling the national approach to secure cloud collaboration as well as the incredible work and commitment by IT Teams and business change professionals across the country.

BT and Cisco have been proud to work with forces and the national bodies during the pandemic to ensure the continued excellence in policing and we have been privileged to partner and support Cityforum in the series of virtual sessions addressing the people, tech and resources approach for the post COVID World that has resulted in this report.

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Developing the workforce, culture and capabilities for the future, people, tech and resources

When this programme of webclaves and podcasts was commissioned in early summer 2020, few were predicting that the virus would be taking more lives at a faster rate and testing public services to the limit almost half a year later. Therefore Cityforum's foresight in inviting some of the very best leaders in policing and criminal justice, and from other public and private sector organisations and academia, to discuss the impacts of COVID-19 could not have been more prescient.

This series, delivered in the very midst of an emergency, has provided one of the first opportunities for those charged with delivering these critical services to pause and reflect on what has been learnt and how they will seek to re shape the culture, workforce and technology of their organisations. In this report we look at some of the lessons emerging from the crisis, how organisations have responded and consider the need for further change as the impact of COVID-19 extends into its second year.

Technology

Arguably, and maybe counterintuitively, COVID-19 has not led directly to any new technologies in policing and criminal justice as so many of the capabilities that have transformed lives professionally and personally were available pre-pandemic. However, it is indisputable that the emergency has been the catalyst for transformational change in business design and service delivery. No amount of hyperbole can convey the pace, depth and breadth of change witnessed in the last 10 months.

In January 2020, the following scenarios were almost unthinkable: Officers seeing witnesses remotely; home based control room staff taking calls for service; interviewing recruits via Teams or Skype; remote Multi Agency Public Protection Arrangement meetings being held by video conference. Senior officers now conducting virtual public meetings and conversations talk of the "democratisation" of public engagement and consultation. They are listening to and explaining their viewpoint to more people and, noticeably, to parts of communities that were previously hard to reach. Or was it that the police were hard to reach? These and countless other technologically enabled engagements are now an essential and accepted way of working. Had COVID-19 struck five or even three years ago, it is almost certain that policing would not have been able to respond as effectively as it has. Barriers to change have also been dismantled, seemingly almost overnight. Previous questions of security, IT resilience, the cost of personal issue devices and, at a human level, the need to meet face to face, have all been subsumed by the operational imperative to release resources from what already feel like antiquated business practices. Chiefs and PCC's are already trying to ensure that the spirit of risk taking that has flourished during the crisis can be nurtured and sustained, albeit sometimes with a little more governance than was feasible in a period of emergency.

There has also been a quiet revolution in the use of data. Forces have needed to manage new demands, identify emerging threats and trends, and share data with partners to support better decision making. Consequently, police leaders are now more than ever required to be data literate. Just as officers want to demonstrate and document their qualifications and prowess at leading investigations, commanding firearms and public order operations, COVID-19 will play

its part in raising the profile and value of those who can understand data and how to explore its huge potential. It is worth noting that this skill set forms one of the three priorities for leadership development at the College of Policing.

Forces also report a greater use of robotics with chatbots relieving staff of a growing proportion of routine generic enquires and of AI enhancing decision making. As with every technological revolution, questions inevitably arise as to whether the efficiencies realised by new technologies will lead to job losses. This is not an irrational fear. Policing leadership will need to articulate a future that focuses as much on enabling technological development as it does on valuing and augmenting the skills and attributes that only people can provide.

Workforce

Contributors made much of the resilience demonstrated by people within their workforce. They also warned that even the most resilient individuals and organisations do not have a bottomless well of energy, compassion and enthusiasm. Although ensuring a higher level of wellbeing has been an objective for many forces for some time, it is apparent that it has become essential for sustaining resilience. More than ever, leaders have recognised that taking care of the workforce is not just the prerogative of a caring organisation, it is a business imperative. There is surely a rich vein for research to explore whether there is a causal effect between high caring forces and those delivering high performance.

The emergency has also heightened awareness of mental health. Perhaps because the effect of COVID-19 has been experienced universally, albeit to vastly varying degrees, organisations have become more finely attuned to the needs of those afflicted by mental illness. With greater understanding comes the opportunity to further destigmatise mental health issues.

Remote working has provided openings for a more diverse workforce with homeworking, remote training and development providing a more flexible way of working for carers and young parents. Furthermore, it might make careers in policing more attractive to some who may otherwise not have considered such a path. Meanwhile forces have discovered the true value of some of their "Cinderella" departments such as health and safety, and business continuity, with Chief Officers testifying that they have quite simply saved lives and helped keep forces running.

Senior officers also spoke in this series of events of the need to engage with the workforce in very different ways. A top down, command and control approach simply could not secure sufficiently fast development of improved operational practice. The crisis has required agility and flexibility to respond to the dynamic series of challenges presented by COVID-19 and this has required different ways of leading and communicating. This was shown clearly by the need to rapidly develop new tactics for policing Black Lives Matter protests. While in the main peaceful, these presented new challenges and required very sensitive yet positive policing. Genuine empowerment of those responsible for delivering the service has been a critical success factor.

The 20,000 new officers joining the service over the next three years give policing the chance to address some of the gaps in service delivery arising from several years of financial constraint. Even before COVID-19, while recognising the political imperative for the public to benefit from the

presence of additional uniformed officers, police leadership was trying to find ways to ensure that the skill sets and capabilities of new recruits would reflect the changing threats to which policing needs to respond. When leaders are considering how to transform service delivery in the light of COVID-19, and when further new investment in law enforcement is probably unlikely, they would clearly welcome opportunities to better target recruitment towards a workforce model fit for purpose.

Leadership and Culture

No single event has tested those charged with leading their organisations and teams in quite the way that COVID-19 has done. Critical incidents, terrorist attacks and major public disorder are all time limited, usually have a geographic locus and generally only affect some elements of some communities at any one time. COVID-19 has crossed all these boundaries. Leaders at every level have had to be adaptable, agile, resilient, resourceful and empathetic both to the communities they serve and with their own workforce. Chief Officers spoke of COVID-19 bringing them closer to their colleagues. There are perhaps two drivers of this effect. At the human level, COVID-19 has been a shared experience while operationally they have had a shared and single unifying purpose.

There is a palpable sense of professional pride in how complex decisions with huge significance have been made while balanced with a tangible sense of the loss communities and individuals have shared. Speakers from all sectors acknowledged the value of having built strong partnerships before the crisis. No doubt training, exercising and collaboration with partners in “peacetime” have all helped. Does this provide the catalyst to work even more closely on issues that, in some areas at least, can still hamper partnership working?

Crime and Emerging Threats

Criminals have been resilient and adaptable. Although crime levels were suppressed during lockdown they quickly rebounded as rules have been relaxed. Crime is only showing a 12% reduction compared to the same period in 2019/20¹. However, as always, crime volumes do not tell the whole story. During lockdown new trends emerged. Online fraud is prolific and drugs markets have adapted. Disturbingly, levels of hidden crime, domestic and child abuse have almost certainly increased. And, with victims of these crimes effectively trapped in their homes, normal sources of refuge, either temporal or geographical, were lost. Policing and the caring professions will need to address suppressed demand that may only be fully revealed once COVID-19 is beaten.

Impact upon the public

More time will need to elapse to fully appreciate the longer-term societal effects of COVID-19, of crime and of the criminality enabled by the crisis and it is unclear how relationships between police and communities living under stress and in fear will change. It appears most likely that it will be the very same communities where the interface between public safety and personal freedoms was most fractious where those relationships will be tested.

¹ NPCC website 8 January 2021 – Update on National Crime Trends and Fixed Penalty Notices issued under Covid Regulations

Policing has never before encroached into the private lives of citizens to the extent that it has done since March 2020. The NPCC reports that 32,329 Fixed Penalty Notices have been issued for breach of COVID-19 regulations² and this will represent only a small proportion of the total interventions. And, while the police’s part in fighting COVID-19 to protect life is a single, simple and unifying mission, implementing it on the street has been anything but simple. However, the 4 E’s of Engage, Explain, Encourage, Enforce is perhaps an example of effective policy making under pressure. Not only is it understandable for police and public, but it provides a model for policing with discretion which, with a few exceptions, has been proportionate, effective and generally supported by the public.

There are however emerging inequalities in how some aspects of COVID-19 have hit the most deprived places. Not only have they borne the brunt of worse health outcomes, they have also been hit hardest economically. With offenders and victims also disproportionately represented in these very same neighbourhoods, there is a very real risk that a Criminal Justice System already under pressure will struggle to maintain the quality of justice communities can expect. The CJS has a huge backlog of unheard cases. It must be a hope that this crisis will serve to do more than merely clear the backlog. This is an opportunity to consider a service re-design.

COVID-19 has also added a new dimension to disadvantage. Technological disadvantage has been most stark within education where some children cannot access the necessary technology. But at least the schools know who they are. In policing, who are the new disadvantaged? Leaders have welcomed the new accountability and answerability that technology, social media and virtual meetings have realised. As voices are heard through these mediums, do those who are either technologically illiterate or ill equipped get drowned out? This question is not confined to the young and poor. The image of the silver surfer, adept on their iPad, lap top and smart phone may be a reassuring one, but is it a reality?

A further challenge which has added complexity to the operational response has been the use and abuse of social media to inculcate conspiracy theories, alternative facts and fake news. Whether this has led to a lack of trust in institutions, or an already existing deficiency in trust provided fertile ground for these views to flourish, may be hard to discern. However, police leadership will need to invest time resources and imagination to counter a range of mostly uncoordinated, but nevertheless harmful threats.

As policing takes stock of all the changes it has made in the last twelve months, it may be worthwhile to reflect on an earlier technological revolution. Unit Beat Policing was introduced in the late 1970s when personal issue radios and a focus on vehicle-based patrol enabled policing to respond to calls more quickly and to combat increasingly mobile criminals. Those new technologies, implemented within the context of a rapidly changing and growing set of threats, seemed to be the answer. However, it is widely acknowledged that, in doing so, policing inadvertently withdrew from the communities they served. Too much of policing was about law enforcement and not enough about relationship building and cultivating the trust which gives policing its legitimacy. In a post COVID-19 world, could a combination of further financial constraint, an over reliance on “virtual” policing and an injection of 20,000 young inexperienced uniformed officers with a mission to enforce be counterproductive to good policing?

² NPCC website 8 January 2021 – Update on National Crime Trends and Fixed Penalty Notices issued under Covid Regulations

However, this can be avoided. The operational imperative created by COVID-19 mitigated against evidence-based practice. At its height in the Spring and Summer, when less was understood about the disease and how the public would respond to the measures imposed to protect communities, decision makers had to make decisions. As the pace of the crisis has lessened in policing terms, there is a requirement to build an evidence base to either validate earlier decisions or to stimulate further testing and evaluation. Much Cityforum work involves bringing people from different disciplines together. Medicine and science have led the world in showing how collaboration and the sharing of knowledge can produce astonishing results in record time. The role of academia could be critical here in providing some of the heavy lifting with policing and lawmakers to bring objectivity and deliver robust research at pace.

Conclusion

To fully appreciate the longer-term impact of COVID-19 and the policing response, more time will need to elapse. What is clear however is that while so much has been learnt already, those with influence and power should already start considering a spectrum of scenarios ranging from a rapid defeat of the virus through to a new normality where the pandemic persists, perhaps indefinitely. Whatever the end game, leaders need to start modelling the longer-term effects of economic recession that will almost certainly hit the poorest hardest, affect and damage the most disadvantaged and those worst affected by the disease.

In many respects, policing can look back on the last year with pride and celebrate its achievements. The challenge now, and it is arguably the more difficult one, is for policing and government to win the peace.

About the Author



David Shaw served as a police officer for 36 years culminating in his role as Chief Constable of West Mercia Police from 2011-16. He also served at chief officer level in West Midlands Police leading on Counter Terrorism, Crime, Local Policing, Criminal Justice and ICT. He has held national portfolios in Fingerprints, Biometric Databases and Conflict Management. In late 2016 David became interim Programme Director for the Transforming Forensics Programme before joining the Home Office Biometrics Programme as Strategic Stakeholder Lead. In September 2019 he began a new role with responsibility for Stakeholder Engagement within the Innovation Team of the Law Enforcement Portfolio of the Home Office, supporting a range of major technology programmes. In July 2020, he commenced a programme of learning which will enable him to become a supervisor on the Police Executive programme at the University of Cambridge.



Cityforum has been contributing to public policy debate since 1990. The organisation comprises a small, trusted, independent group of experienced individuals, respected for their intellectual honesty, knowledge and extensive contacts spanning the private, public and not-for-profit sectors at all levels. In addition, it works closely with a large network of associates, providing depth, breadth and genuine expertise and practical experience. They include a former Cabinet Minister, a retired Member of the Episcopal Bench, public service officials, military, police, intelligence and security specialists, senior medical figures and business executives, academics, journalists and publishers. They contribute in London and elsewhere to Cityforum events and to the studies we undertake, including interviewing at all levels in organisations and sectors of interest.

From its inception working with the Bank of England on the Basel Accords; with the Reserve Bank of South Africa on the transition from apartheid; hosting and planning with the Scottish Government the Adam Smith Bicentenary; Cityforum has been active in an increasing number of areas that now include collaborations in security, policing, crime and justice, emergency services, critical national infrastructure, cyber, privacy, health and social care, transport, financial services, regulation and energy.

It researches and publishes reports and develops and hosts events in the UK and, where invited, around the world. As part of its bespoke advisory and strategic guidance service the organisation also acts as a 'candid friend' to senior public-sector executives, and undertakes studies and reviews, providing sound impartial advice and specialist judgement to assist in meeting the enormous challenges faced by the public service today.

With over 25 years shaping strategic thinking, building understanding and adding value within and between diverse groups, the organisation has a proven track record. Its highly regarded round table discussions and smaller conclaves are well known both for bringing together an enviable mix of decision makers and practitioners and for stimulating new thinking in response to some of the most difficult contemporary public policy challenges.

Cityforum has a particular interest in working with the police and holds three or four Round Tables a year on strategic, technological, human resources, value for money and strategic communication questions affecting the service. It also undertakes specialist advisory and monitoring work for individual Police and Crime Commissioners, and Chief Officers. This has been particularly useful when PCCs - Police and crime commissioners and Chiefs require studies to be undertaken by a seasoned group of specialists who operate methodically and quickly, and have particular skills in interviewing at every level in the organisations requesting assistance. Its reports are succinct and written in readable English rather than in management speak loaded with acronyms.

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