Reflections on the Northern Ireland experience

The lessons underpinning the normalisation of policing and security in a divided society

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POLICE SERVICE OF NORTHERN IRELAND, INTERCOMM and SAFERWORLD

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Map of districts of Belfast colour coded to show the predominant religious denomination.

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Abbreviations

AEPs	Attenuating Energy Projectiles
CLMC	Combined Loyalist Military Command
CIRA	Continuity Irish Republican Army
DUP	Democratic Unionist Party
GFA	Good Friday Agreement
INLA	Irish National Liberation Army
NIPC	Northern Ireland Parades Commission
NIPB	Northern Ireland Policing Board
OPONI	Office of Police Ombudsman Northern Ireland
PPS	Public Prosecution Service
PSNI	Police Service of Northern Ireland
PIRA	Provisional Irish Republican Army
RHC	Red Hand Commando
RUC	Royal Ulster Constabulary
UDA	Ulster Defence Association
UDR	Ulster Defence Regiment
UFF	Ulster Freedom Fighters
UVF	Ulster Volunteer Force
RIRA	Real Irish Republican Army
SF	Sinn Fein
TSG	Tactical Support Group

Foreword
Intercomm

Intercomm has been working with the Police Service of Northern Ireland (PSNI) and our colleagues at Saferworld over many years hosting international delegations and sharing peace building practice locally and internationally. Over the last year we sought to reflect on and capture the key learning from how we individually and collectively understand the transformation of policing in Northern Ireland.

Fifteen years after the Good Friday Agreement (1998) Northern Ireland still remains a society in transition – a society that is still working through the journey from war and conflict to a better future. The peace process remains a work in progress. Policing was a touchstone issue of the peace process. Issues of an anti-peace process still committed to violence, peace walls, division and segregation all require immediate and urgent focus. Challenges remain in building the peace – yet much has been achieved. This cannot be undervalued or indeed taken for granted.

The transformation of policing and the predominance of the policing with community ethos of the PSNI have resonance with other societies emerging out of conflict. As such we believed we had an obligation to engage many voices to document – and give practical expression – to the lessons learned on policing and security transformation.

The report is unique in that it is informed by the concrete experience of those police officers who, on the one side, were central to the strategic implementation of the community policing model and those community leaders – Loyalist and Republican – on the other who gave leadership in their communities to build confidence in the new policing arrangements.

To deliver the vision of a new beginning to policing, Patten made 175 recommendations. The recommendations dealt with many issues, including: a change in name, uniform, new oath of allegiance, and substantial changes to structure, training and accountability mechanisms. Patten's benchmarks were: effectiveness, efficiency, impartiality, accountability and respect for human rights. These are the indicators against which communities are gauging progress in policing. That, however, is only one part of the story.

The other is on the importance of human relationships and communication in managing transition – and the role of leadership and growing trust where none previously existed between communities and the police – in the midst of significant political and institutional change.

In reality it is where institutional change shapes the everyday practice of policing that determines whether public confidence has been achieved in policing. This report is a vital resource as it gives voice and language to a transformation process of policing from within and outside the institution of policing that seeks to act as an evidence

based reference to other societies seeking policing transformation and as a key issue in addressing political conflict.

Finally, I would just like to thank all our contributors and a particular word of appreciation to the report author, Dr Jonny Byrne, who made a significant effort in compiling this report.

Liam Maskey
Chief Executive, Intercomm

Foreword
Police Service of Northern Ireland

Participating in the roundtable discussions that led to this report has allowed the Police Service of Northern Ireland to take stock of the progress that has been made in the transformation of policing in Northern Ireland over the past 15 years.

It has also enabled reflection on what needs to be done to take the quality of police and community relations to an even better place. The workshops from which this report was born brought together police officers and community based practitioners to share experiences, impressions and reflections of the significant progress which has been made. But, they also created space to consider the many obstacles faced on the journey. The involvement of academic and international experience brought rigorous and real challenge to current thinking and paradigms.

The transferability of the Northern Ireland experience to other post conflict scenarios is clear to the open minded practitioner and policy maker. The Northern Ireland journey has been, and continues to be, a challenging and bumpy ride at times, especially in policing of contentious events that all too often result in violence and serious disorder. However, the value of this report should be to give encouragement to those involved in Northern Ireland and further afield regarding what can be achieved if people from diverse backgrounds and aspirations work together to make society better for the generations that will follow us.

This report highlights that engagement and partnerships with communities, robust accountability mechanisms within a human rights framework and treating citizens of competing perspectives with equal respect and fairness are the essential foundations of good policing in any post conflict situation.

George Hamilton
Chief Constable of the Police Service of Northern Ireland

Foreword
Saferworld

The world over, security and justice systems that provide safety, uphold the rule of law, and deliver accessible and accountable services to all, play an important part in building and maintaining state legitimacy and underpinning post-conflict recovery and development. At its most fundamental, improving human security relies on allowing local people to play a role in decision-making – which itself implies changes in power and resource relationships.

In Saferworld's experience working with conflict-affected communities in Africa, Asia, Europe and the Middle East, divisions along sectarian or ethnic lines can be replicated through security and justice policies and institutions that alienate certain groups. Our approach aims to understand these dynamics and strengthen relationships between communities and the institutions that serve them, so security and justice provision prioritises the needs and concerns of local people, including those who are marginalised or vulnerable.

We know post-conflict recovery to be a long-term, complex process, and that there is no template that can be applied uniformly to all contexts. Nevertheless, there are familiar characteristics common to many transition processes that are well-illustrated by the Northern Ireland experience. Issues of language and communication, leadership and sacrifice, trust, partnership, empowerment and accountability are all highlighted in this report and resonate with our own experience supporting communities and authorities emerging from conflict elsewhere.

We are grateful to Intercomm and the PSNI for the opportunity to participate in this reflective process and found the frank and open exchanges between the report's contributors captivating and enlightening. There is much to be learned from the experience of Northern Ireland's ongoing transition as seen through the eyes of those who are living it and making it happen on a daily basis. We look forward to developing these partnerships and sharing the learning from Northern Ireland to current and future conflict prevention and peacebuilding programmes elsewhere.

Paul Murphy
Executive Director, Saferworld

1 Introduction

This policy brief focuses on the themes and issues surrounding 'policing and justice transformation' in Northern Ireland – a society emerging from a sustained conflict. It resulted from a series of facilitated roundtable discussions held in June 2013 with community practitioners, policing personnel, and associates from political organisations, all of whom had experience (both strategic and operational) of engaging on, and addressing issues aligned with community safety, policing and security before and during the current peace and political processes. The conversations drew on the participants' views of three broad areas of police reform and community-based security, specifically:

- experiences and challenges of community-based policing
- realities of policing public order events and protests
- policing in transition – practical and strategic experiences

The purpose of the briefing paper is to articulate the context and potential lessons learned from practitioners and state actors that have been involved in 'policing and security' as Northern Ireland has emerged out of 30 years of sustained violent conflict. Furthermore, it is anticipated that the policy brief will:

- provide a catalyst for discussions around police reform and broader issues of community-based security in countries associated with conflict and political transition
- provide a foundation for a training resource for practitioners
- become a resource for engaging in policy dialogue with those tasked with implementing policies connected to security-based reform
- become a reflective tool for those in Northern Ireland currently engaged in issues pertaining to policing and community safety

The remainder of the policy brief includes a broad overview of the Northern Ireland context, with a focus on the salient features of the conflict, the peace and political processes, and the challenges to policing reform. This is followed by a brief review of the methodology employed to develop and manage the roundtable discussions, and a presentation of the findings from these conversations. The briefing concludes with a series of observations from the Northern Ireland experience, which offers insights and potential lessons for those tasked with supporting policing and security reform in conflict-affected and fragile contexts. It also provides a reflective tool for those tasked with continuing the work around policing reform in Northern Ireland.

2 The Northern Ireland context

The origins of the most recent sustained period of violence known as the conflict in Northern Ireland can be traced back to the civil rights movement that emerged in 1968, the coercive response by the Unionist government and communities, and subsequent armed Republican campaign against the British government and security forces. What followed was over 30 years of sectarian violence, insurgency, terrorism, counter-insurgency, marches and demonstrations, and the separation of communities through housing, education, sport and culture. The main actors in the conflict were:

- the Irish and British governments
- local politicians
- the security forces, namely the British Army, Royal Ulster Constabulary (RUC), and the Ulster Defence Regiment (UDR)
- Republican paramilitaries such as the Provisional Irish Republican Army (PIRA) and Irish National Liberation Army (INLA)
- Loyalist paramilitaries that included the Red Hand Commando (RHC), Ulster Defence Association (UDA), Ulster Volunteer Force (UVF), and the Ulster Freedom Fighters (UFF)

The body of evidence suggests that from June 1966 to May 2006 there were 3,720 deaths as a result of the violence, 3,453 of which occurred in Northern Ireland. 2,119 were civilians, 1,039 from security forces, and 562 from Paramilitary organisations.

From the early 1990s a peace and political process was initiated that culminated with the signing of The Joint Declaration (1993) by both the British and Irish governments which addressed issues of self-determination and the principle of consent with regards to the sovereignty of Northern Ireland. On 31 August 1994 the PIRA announced a complete cessation of its armed struggle and on 13 October the Combined Loyalist Military Command announced a ceasefire. What followed was a series of multiparty talks and negotiations involving the Irish, British, and US governments and local politicians that resulted in the signing of the Belfast/Good Friday Agreement on 10 April 1998. The signing of the Agreement was not a conclusion to the conflict nor a resolution of the issues and problems that had been the catalyst for the violence and disorder. Instead, the Agreement provided a framework for the transformation of the conflict through a peaceful political process.

The document was characterised by three strands which were representative of the elements considered to be at the root of the conflict. Strand One was concerned with the establishment of a power-sharing assembly that required cross-party support in any decision-making (and would have responsibility for all devolved matters including policing and security following the devolution of the Department of Justice in 2010). Strand Two focused on North–South relations through a North– South Ministerial Council with membership drawn from the Assembly and the Dail. And Strand Three involved the establishment of the British–Irish Council with representatives from the British and Irish governments, the Assembly and the devolved institutions in Scotland, Wales, the Isle of Man and the Channel Islands.

The political breakthrough in April 1998 was followed by sporadic periods of devolved and direct rule administration, with policing reform issues and the decommissioning of paramilitary weapons dominating the headlines. In 2006 the British and Irish governments interjected again with the Inter-governmental St Andrews Agreement that was signed on 13 October 2006. This document resulted in Sinn Féin endorsing the Police Service of Northern Ireland (PSNI) and the Democratic Unionist Party (DUP) committing to power sharing with both Republicans and Nationalists in the NI Assembly. Since 8 May 2007 Northern Ireland has experienced its most stable political period, with devolution involving all of the major political parties running continuously.

2.1 Transforming policing and security in Northern Ireland

Although it is important to recognise the success of the peace and political processes, it is also necessary to acknowledge that several of the more contentious and politically sensitive issues of the conflict have been addressed through third party intervention and away from political interference. The most cited illustration of this has been the transformation of the policing and justice institutions in Northern Ireland. Essentially, as part of the process of political transition, it was crucial to undertake the reform of policing structures and practices to ensure that the police were regarded as a legitimate and acceptable organisation to all sections of the community and that a reformed police organisation would be structured to meet the needs of a society at peace rather than one at war.

An independent commission into policing was set up as part of the 1998 peace agreement and its report, known after the commission's chairperson as the Patten Report (1999), included 175 recommendations which were designed to transform the nature of policing in Northern Ireland. The report advocated a new approach to policing which would be based on human rights principles, public accountability and transparency rather than being dominated by concerns for security and secrecy. The new organisation, renamed as the Police Service of Northern Ireland (PSNI), would be based around the core focus of community-oriented policing. Its priorities were crime prevention, order maintenance and local participation. The PSNI was to be smaller in size, but more representative of each of the two main communities, as well as aspiring to be more gender balanced and to attract more members of minority ethnic communities. The process of reform was primarily designed to address the lack of police legitimacy within the Catholic nationalist community, particularly within working class areas, and to create a service that would serve the interests of all equally.

2.2 Policing landscape in 2013

It is fair to conclude that a decade after the onset of policing reform in Northern Ireland, the policing and security landscape has undergone significant transformation. The PSNI and wider criminal justice system has widespread support from all of the political parties and enjoys backing from the majority of the community. However, it is important to make two observations about the issues the PSNI regularly faces which are connected to the conflict, and were not necessarily envisaged at the time of the

Patten recommendations. Firstly, there remains a clear and present danger through a number of small dissident (anti-peace process) Republican terrorist organisations that are committed to an armed campaign. Groups such as the Real Irish Republican Army (RIRA), Continuity Irish Republican Army (CIRA), and Irish Republican Army (IRA) continue to employ tactics that include shootings, mortar attacks, and pipe bombs, with the aim of injuring and murdering members of the security services. Furthermore, these groups participate in what they refer to as civil administration, in other words policing activities through the application of 'rough' justice, in small pockets of Republican communities.

Secondly, the PSNI continues to be the arbiter for the failure of politics to address the sensitive issues of flags, commemorations and parades, and the legacy of the past. Throughout 2013 parts of Northern Ireland witnessed severe public disorder and rioting from particular individuals and groups in response to decision-making processes undertaken by local councils and the Northern Ireland Parades Commission. When there was anger and frustration with these decisions, the protests often spilled over into violent exchanges with the PSNI. Between December 2012 and September 2013 over 500 officers had been injured and over 700 people had been arrested as a result of public disorder.

It is important that readers are aware of the subtle complexities of the policing landscape in Northern Ireland. Although the levels and types of policing incidents are not comparable with events during the conflict, they still have an impact at some level on the relationships between the PSNI and the public within certain communities. The conversations that informed this policy brief involved individuals from a variety of backgrounds with a broad range of experience in policing and security issues.

3 Methodology

"Look I'm not saying that every interaction is positive with the police... but they are honest conversations, and both the police and ourselves are trying."

Loyalist representative

Essentially the policy brief was developed through a series of conversations facilitated through a Saferworld and Intercomm roundtable event in May 2013. The roundtable discussions took place over one and a half days and involved individuals from a range of backgrounds linked to policing and security in North and West Belfast – areas that witnessed the worst of the conflict in terms of deaths and casualties. These included community development and interface workers from both Loyalist and Republican backgrounds; police officers from an operational and strategic background (neighbourhood officers and senior command team officers); academics; and members of civil society. From the outset participants were separated into two groups, making sure that the groups were representative of the diverse backgrounds and experiences present. Each group was provided with a facilitator and note-taker. Over the duration of the roundtable, each group participated in four sessions based around the following thematic questions:

The Police Service of Northern Ireland face demonstrators during a protest. Despite a move to community policing, the PSNI still have to use 'hard policing' tactics during some clashes.

© PSNI

a. What does a community-based model of policing and security look like? How was it formulated and implemented? Who and what are the key actors required to make it work?

b. What are the characteristics of public order policing? How did the state respond to protests? How was 'protest' managed from a community perspective?

c. In terms of policing and security, how was the transition period managed? Who was responsible at both the macro and micro levels for facilitating the implementation of plans and policies?

d. What lessons does the Northern Irish experience offer to other communities and other societies engaging with police reform within a contested political environment?

After each facilitated session all of the participants were brought together into a plenary setting. Within this environment they had an opportunity to articulate to the entire group their views, opinions and interpretations of the challenges around policing and security in North and West Belfast. A second roundtable was convened in December 2013 to review, discuss and validate the draft policy brief with many of the original participants of the first roundtable.

The remainder of this policy brief outlines the central findings from the roundtable in terms of participants' understanding and experience of community policing, the challenges to public order policing, and the factors associated with managing policing and security through a transitional period. The final section outlines the core lessons that emerged from the personal and organisational experiences of policing in Northern Ireland over the last decade.

4 Community policing

"You know it's important when people really think about community policing, that they begin to see the community as an important resource."

Republican community representative

One can begin to understand the complexities, challenges and personal sacrifices associated with security reform during the transition from conflict to peace through the implementation of the 'policing with the community strategy' by the PSNI from 2001. Under Recommendation 44 of the Patten Report the PSNI was tasked with formulating and delivering a policing with the community strategy, which would underpin the institutional transformation process. Throughout the conflict, policing in Northern Ireland was characterised by its militaristic nature and a need to combat paramilitary activity and sectarian violence. However, the paramilitary ceasefires and subsequent decommissioning of weapons heralded a new environment within which the PSNI was to operate.

The following section draws together the views and experiences of those that have been tasked with delivering a community policing strategy, and those with first hand experiences of facilitating engagement between local residents and the PSNI. A series of themes emanated from the discussions, and these have been outlined below.

4.1 Language

From the outset it was clear that language and how it was interpreted and defined was a crucial component for the successful delivery of a community policing strategy. Since the start of the new policing strategy, terms such as 'community safety', 'neighbourhood policing', and 'tension monitoring' have entered the policing and justice lexicon. Furthermore, from the communities' perspective 'safety' was viewed as both positive and empowering, while 'security' was considered as something done to them by the state. Over the last decade, both the PSNI and local communities have undergone a re-education process in terms of how they articulate both their own needs and expectations in relation to policing and community safety.

4.2 Communication

In relation to the delivery of a 'community policing' model, participants noted that underpinning any process was the need for clear, concise, continuous, and unambiguous lines of communication between the public and police. Establishing solid networks and reputable 'points of contact' was at the core of building relationships between the

PSNI and local residents. Through the development of 'good and reliable lines of communication', trust was gradually established, as well as an understanding of the different roles and responsibilities of those tasked with delivering policing and community safety initiatives. It was evident that where PSNI and community activists had solid lines of communication, they had positive policing experiences. However, it was also noted that when communication broke down it often led to misinterpretations of situations, distrust and disengagement.

4.3 Organisational structures

Police officers patrol the streets in Belfast. The PSNI were keen to attend public meetings, participate in community events and become a very visible presence in areas where formal policing had been extremely contested.
© PSNI

"In my experience communities don't do hierarchies, they do relationships... therefore it's really important that the police on the front line realise that they represent the values and the vision of what policing is about."

Republican community representative

The new post-conflict environment within which community and police had to operate brought many challenges for all of the stakeholders. According to community activists and senior PSNI figures, one of the greatest challenges was both recognising and embracing how each of the main actors functioned, because there is often a tendency for any given side in a conflict to assume that the other is organised along similar lines to their own. The police, being essentially hierarchical in structure, initially looked for a hierarchical type of leadership as an interlocutor within communities – which often did not exist. Likewise, the communities often formed relationships – however useful – on a more atomised and individual scale, and failed to recognise the centralised structure that sits over those individuals within the PSNI.

4.4 Emerging leaders

Aside from the functional differences within communities and the PSNI, participants acknowledged that leadership across the policing and community spectrum was a crucial element in the normalisation of relationships. Participants noted that particular individuals (from both the PSNI and community) in the early years of the transitional period put themselves forward, took risks and looked to build positive and meaningful relationships. The initial months and years of the new policing environment were characterised by suspicion, caution and observation. However, in some of the communities that had experienced the worst of the conflict in terms of injuries and loss of life, individuals from the community and the PSNI stepped forward and committed to a process of engagement. This was not easy for any involved considering the 'hurt'

experienced in the preceding years, yet they understood the importance of creating safer communities. Figure 1 provides an overview of the themes that underpinned the leadership shown by individuals from the PSNI in the early years of transition. According to participants, one of the greatest challenges was understanding the 'new' relationship between the PSNI and the community. One element of this was recognising that the PSNI could not and should not be solely responsible for policing, and that the community had an integral role to play. The community also had to recognise that they could not be passive and had to commit to the process and subsequent transformations.

Figure 2 presents the themes that underpinned the leadership shown by representatives from the community. One of the key tests for these individuals was both promoting the legitimacy of the PSNI and advocating the need for community support for the rule of law. Many of these communities had previously viewed the police as the enemy and had been encouraged and threatened not to engage with them.

Figure 1: Underpinning 'leadership' within the new policing institutions

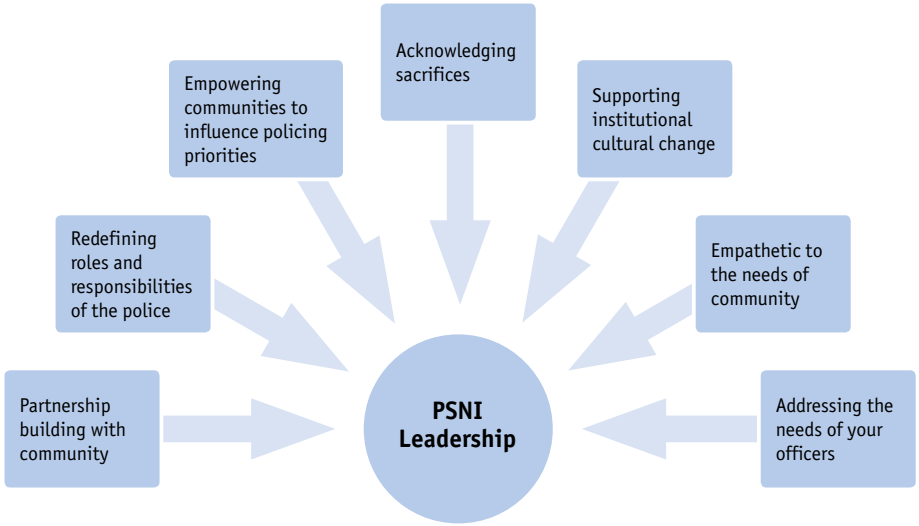
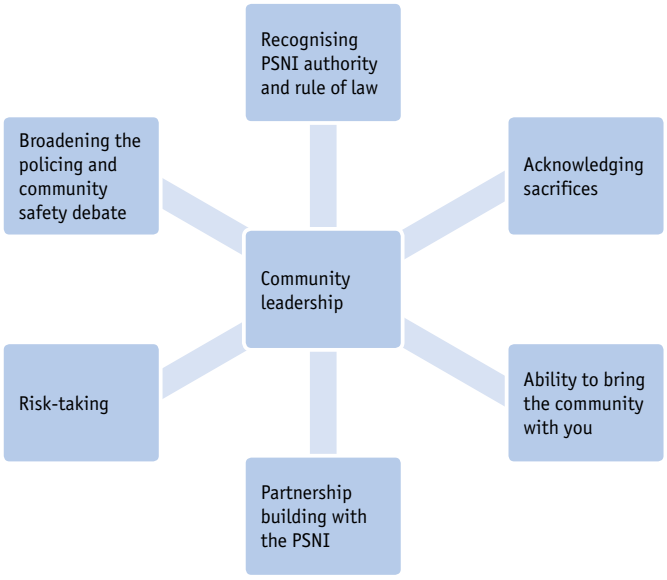


Figure 2: Underpinning 'leadership' within the community



4.5 Visible and tangible differences

PSNI worked with community groups and young people from both sides of the conflict, establishing a local football tournament to build trust.
© PSNI

"No partner can be described as perfect... but the experience to date of working with the police, puts them head and shoulders above other public bodies working in this arena."

Loyalist representative

According to participants, one of the main methods of generating widespread community support for policing was to generate positive and tangible outcomes that could be measured through improvements to the public's quality of life. From the outset the PSNI with the support of community representatives consulted with local residents, took on board their concerns and looked to put in place strategies that could address them. In essence, the community wanted to see the PSNI engaging in tactics that would reduce crime and anti-social behaviour. They wanted to see PSNI officers in their neighbourhoods; they wanted to see criminals being arrested; and they wanted to feel safer in their community. Many of these communities had never experienced 'proper policing', so they often judged the service on first impressions and whether 'they were better off' with the new institutions. As a result, the PSNI were keen to attend public meetings, participate in community events and become a very visible presence in areas where formal policing had been extremely contested.

It is important to acknowledge the importance of the Patten recommendations, as they provided the PSNI and the community with a structure in which they could begin the process of meaningful engagement. The report provided direction and allowed for the establishment of links between the structures at the top and bottom – essentially creating a more joined-up approach to the implementation of reform.

4.6 Flexibility

There was recognition from all parties that the implementation of a new and innovative community policing strategy required a process underpinned by long-term stability and short-term flexibility. The general vision, strategy and structures needed to be stable, and there had to be a strong commitment to all of them from stakeholders. However, a huge amount of flexibility is needed on a day-to-day basis to keep balance in rapidly changing conditions and contexts. The nature of transition means that events outside the remit of the PSNI or communities can very often have a direct effect on police–community relationships. For example, participants pointed to issues associated with the political system and the *legacy of the conflict* as having an impact on the implementation of the community policing strategy. Specifically, 'dealing with the past' is an issue that has real implications for the practical delivery of policing in in the here and

now. The absence of an agreed method of dealing with the past has meant that many of the subsequent issues have become bound up in the role and function of the PSNI.

4.7 Political distance

There was general consensus among participants that one of the most successful elements of the new PSNI and community landscape was the separation of policing and politics. Specifically, this refers to the operational independence of the police. It was also noted that the political representatives have been and continue to be important in holding the police to account and acting as a conjugant for the communities they represent. Establishing the independence of the new institutions from the outset was a crucial component of the community policing strategy. Local elected representatives were used as conduits between the PSNI and communities, and acted as mechanisms through which the public could hold the PSNI to account. In the majority of cases this has not brought the legitimacy of the PSNI into question and their decision-making has not been seen to be underpinned by political influence or agendas. Yet there remains a minority within the Republican and Loyalist communities who would contend that the PSNI continues to exercise tactics underpinned by political interference, for example in its approach to dissident Republicans or Loyalist flag protestors.

4.8 Non-state actors

A common theme from the discussions centred on the importance of the role and responsibility of non-state actors, otherwise labelled as ex-combatants, community-representatives or development workers. In terms of supporting the PSNI, advocating the need for a police service, and encouraging local people to report crimes, these actors proved crucial in the aftermath of institutional change. Underpinning the relationship between the PSNI and non-state actors was 'trust', which was something that everyone agreed took time to emerge. Trust was established through an individual's ability to deliver on their commitments and by instigating positive change within their respective communities and institutions. It was noted that in the early years of transition, a significant amount of trust was formed between individuals and not between communities and institutions. However, these personal relationships proved the catalyst for increased engagement and more formalised relationships across society.

4.9 Community consultation

A key requisite surrounding increased community 'buy in' for the new policing and justice structures centred on whether communities felt *empowered* within the new processes. The participants revealed that by empowering communities and stating that they had opportunities to influence the policing agenda (at the local level), it increased institutional legitimacy and built confidence in the system. Therefore, at the local level, the PSNI with the support of other public bodies created opportunities which allowed residents to articulate concerns; identify what they felt the policing priorities should be, and when appropriate criticise past and current policing actions. Through consultation processes, the PSNI incorporated the public's views, opinions, and fears into their operational plans and, by doing so, informed the community that they were a crucial element within the delivery of the community policing strategy.

4.10 Development of partnerships

One of the most significant aspects of the community policing strategy was the move to incorporate other public bodies and community structures into the ever-widening debate on policing and safety. A new multi-agency approach to policing and community safety emerged which meant bodies responsible for education, health, housing and employment had a role in improving the quality of life within communities. There was an acknowledgement that this initial transitional period – which has seen roles and

responsibilities transform and agencies previously absent from the policing debate become more prominent – has been challenging. Furthermore, the people themselves have undergone an educational process in terms of 'what constitutes a policing response, and who is best suited to address the needs of the community'. According to participants, the realisation that the responsibility for 'policing and community safety' went beyond the remit of the PSNI increased collaboration, consolidated resources, and provided a more positive service for the community. It was interesting to note that several participants felt that the partnerships across the public sector would have been strengthened if they had been underpinned by strong legislation. A legal basis would have ensured co-operation and the sharing of information, and ultimately increased accountability. As it stands, the PSNI through the Police Ombudsman's Office and the Policing Board appears to be the only body with multiple agencies monitoring its role in delivering the policing with the community strategy.

4.11 Evaluating performance

When asked to articulate one of the key difficulties that has surrounded the implementation of 'community policing', participants agreed that assessing its impact at both the micro (local neighbourhood level) and macro levels (local government and Stormont national level) has proved problematic. Very often, when done right, community policing has not resulted in a quantifiable product. Instead, it has made people feel safer and more confident within their communities. These are very difficult outputs to calculate and measure. As a consequence, there have been occasions where community policing has been unable to claim success because recipients have not attributed the impact to the PSNI.

4.12 Challenges

The participants were keen to articulate two specific challenges to the successful implementation of a community policing strategy in a society moving from conflict to peace. Firstly, it was agreed that the issues associated with the legacy of the conflict had the potential to disrupt contemporary policing priorities and relationships with the public. While investigations continued into past police practices and that of other participants who have made the transition, there was the risk that the PSNI would become associated with previous failures and tainted by media stories. Furthermore, in terms of resources, the PSNI had to allocate officers and ring fence budgets to keep up with the public demand for investigations. Secondly, participants agreed that while politicians continued to disagree on methods to resolve issues around parades, flags and commemorations (otherwise referred to as the fractures of the peace and political processes), the PSNI would continue to be referees for the lack of political agreement and solutions.

4.13 Summary

The review of 'community policing' has provided a framework in which one can observe the complex and intricate relations at both the micro and macro levels of policing and community safety. Drawing on the participants' experience it is clear that:

- Implementing a community policing strategy required a collective effort and commitment from civil society, public bodies and the political institutions.
- The implementation of the strategy also highlighted the importance of 'leadership' and the recognition that transformation requires time.
- Furthermore, the challenges identified reinforce the position that policing, as a function, must remain independent of the newly formed political institutions.

5 Policing and managing public disorder

"It's about standing up and being counted and that requires leaders from the community and the police. There have been many incidents where progress could have been derailed in volatile circumstances around parades and protests... and just when you expected anarchy to emerge, individuals from the PSNI and our community took risks and quelled tensions. It would have been easier to do nothing."

Republican representative

Historically, the policing of public order events along with the management of protests have proven contentious, challenging and particularly divisive in Northern Ireland. Throughout the conflict the policing and security bodies constantly had to manage sectarian riots, and violent disputes between opposing communities. More recently, the PSNI have had to 'police' disputes between opposing sides, usually as a result of parading decisions. On occasions these become volatile situations, which have resulted in large-scale public disorder. These incidents are often characterised by injuries to the PSNI and the public, and many arrests and potential prosecutions.

In terms of the discussions, participants were asked to outline their thoughts on what constituted the key issues surrounding the role of the community and police in managing public disorder in the 'new' Northern Ireland.

5.1 Interpretations

From the outset, 'public order policing' was interpreted and understood in a variety of different ways. For some, this type of policing was associated primarily with parades, protests and large-scale sporting events, while for others it encompassed the night-time economy, bonfires, community festivals and house searches. From the outset it was clear that the PSNI had a different understanding of what constituted public order policing compared to community representatives. However, there was a broad consensus that it was the 'sharp end of policing' and often placed the organisation in an impossible position. It was also evident from the majority of participants from the community that they clearly distinguished this form of policing from other types of policing delivery, with public order policing seen as presenting a stark contrast to 'community policing', 'neighbourhood policing' or more simply 'normal policing'.

Public order policing was not only seen as a combination of particular activities and events, but also about the manner in which the PSNI approached and responded to the event and communities. A snapshot of perspectives revealed that public order policing was often *defined* as:

- Negative policing in dangerous and complex situations
- Conversations and negotiation giving way to physical force and violence
- A core element of policing, delivered in difficult and challenging environments

In relation to how the community *thought about* public order policing, several respondents noted that it:

- Consisted of PSNI units of young, excitable, thrill seeking male officers
- Comprised specialist officers who did not participate in 'normal' policing such as neighbourhood and/or community policing
- Was undertaken by police officers in distinctive clothing, often referred to as 'ninja suits' or 'riot/Rambo gear'
- Represented a dangerous and life threatening element of policing that had the potential to affect relationships between the wider public

There was a general acceptance that public order policing often took place in an environment characterised by violence along with aggressive and threatening behaviours. Those that had first-hand experience of the policing of public events were also keen to acknowledge that many changes had occurred as part of the delivery of public order policing in the last decade – both at an operational and strategic level. There was an acknowledgement of the legitimacy of different lenses to understand the policing of public order events (police and community lenses). The participants noted a number of observations about the PSNI's approach to public order policing over the last decade:

- A significant decrease in the use of force from officers on the front line
- A more graduated response to contentious events i.e. the officers were less likely to respond with force to incidents
- A significant reduction in the use of Attenuating Energy Projectiles (AEPs)
- More engagement with the community before, during and after events (especially around parades and protests)
- Increased opportunities for community input into the policing of events (specific reference to parades)
- More flexibility and interaction during the policing of public events with key actors from the community and the PSNI

5.2 Delivering 'public order' policing

One of the most heated discussions with participants from both the PSNI and community representatives centred on the PSNI's response to certain public order situations. Essentially, the debate centred on the types and levels of force employed by officers during public events (specific reference was made to parades and protests). Although it was recognised that there had been a significant decrease in the use of force by the PSNI since the onset of the peace and political processes, several community participants maintained that the PSNI was still too quick to disengage from conversations and use physical force to resolve public order situations. Aggressive tactics included charging at groups of people; the firing of AEPs; the use of water cannon; and the use of shields to prohibit the movement of people. It was felt that these tactics simply provoked the community and enticed crowds to respond in a negative, often violent way. Participants also indicated that these tactics had the potential to increase wider disengagement in the longer term between the community and the police once the

Nationalist youths clash with riot police after trouble erupted in the Ardoyne area of North Belfast, 12 July 2012.
© REUTERS/CATHAL MCNAUGHTON

public order event had finished. However, this must also be understood through the PSNI's commitment to police disorder within a clear human rights framework, while also being subject to extensive scrutiny from Office of Police Ombudsman for Northern Ireland, including an independent investigation of every AEP discharged.

It is also important to note that the PSNI, along with community representatives, felt that there had been a significant decrease in the use of force at public order situations over the last decade. This was evidenced by the marked decrease in the use of AEPs. According to officers, there was a clear attempt within the PSNI to outline the wider implications of public order policing to the organisation. Particular attention was placed on how anti-peace elements might manipulate situations, and also, how neighbourhood policing could be adversely affected by perceived negative police tactics during public order situations.

5.3 Language and aesthetics of the conflict

Many from the community sector viewed policing in Northern Ireland as being characterised by two distinct and very specific styles of policing. On the one hand respondents talked of policing conducted by officers in uniforms defined by white shirts and/or high visibility jackets. On the other hand, and in contrast, policing was also defined by aggressive, 'militarised units in riot gear' viewed through public order policing. The former approach represented the contemporary, progressive form of policing associated with policing since the Patten recommendations, and from a community perspective was based upon a community-oriented, inclusive and open approach involving the public and the PSNI. The latter was described as representing the legacy of the Royal Ulster Constabulary (RUC), highlighting what had failed to change as part of the new beginning to policing started under Patten. This type of policing was considered the opposite of the 'community based model', one associated with policing the conflict and not the peace. It should be noted that police participants, while acknowledging this perception, saw the use of public order equipment and tactics as a function of the ongoing threat they faced resulting from the absence of political or societal resolution to community conflict, mainly regarding parades and protests.

Several participants noted that elements within the community saw public order events (namely parades and protests) as a chance to recreate images of the pre-transformation policing institutions. They could use these events as opportunities to create confrontation between the PSNI and the public, and entice officers into situations that might result in overly aggressive policing behaviours – enabling them to peddle the narrative that policing had not changed and that the PSNI were simply the RUC in different uniforms. As previously noted, the PSNI had a different narrative which held that the organisation

was aware of the sensitivities around this form of policing and had implemented significant reform processes to address previous concerns over policing of public order events. There was an institutional acknowledgement that their actions could have serious ramifications across the community, so an emphasis was placed on communicating with the local community before a planned event.

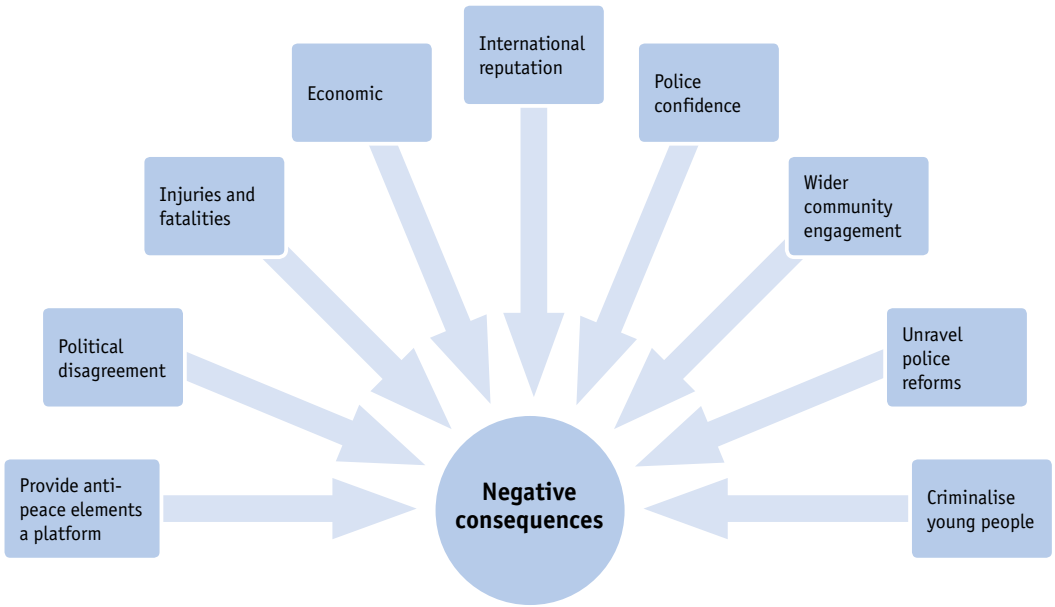
5.4 Politics and policing

Building on the previous theme, there was a general consensus from community participants that public order policing, especially during parades and protests, had the potential to reconnect policing and politics once again. Participants noted that in the past there were numerous incidents of politicians commenting in the media about determinations made by the Parades Commission, and actually calling on members of the public to attend particular parades or protests sometimes in a show of support and sometimes to encourage people to defy the law. Furthermore, there have been examples of politicians making themselves visible in contested spaces (either in parades or protests) prior to or during violent exchanges between the public and PSNI. It was not always clear whether that political presence was to influence and maintain order or to give political support to the protests.

5.5 Impact and consequences

There was a consensus from the participants that how public order events were managed had implications on the PSNI and relationships with the wider public. According to PSNI representatives, the positive policing of such events rarely gets reported in the media, or discussed within the community. However, when public order events materialise into large-scale riots, running battles between the PSNI and protestors, and the firing of AEPs and petrol bombs, the media are quick to 'tell that particular story'. These images are projected locally, nationally and internationally and have a detrimental effect across a number of areas in Northern Ireland (figure 3). When pressed, respondents felt that when public order policing was perceived to be overly aggressive and antagonistic it had an effect on relationships and levels of engagement between neighbourhood officers and residents – people became more distant, and less likely to report crime and engage with the police.

Figure 3: The impact of perceived negative public order policing



5.6 No surprises

"In some of the most volatile situations we look for officers we know and trust and provide confidence in the policing of the community."

Community worker

In drawing the conversations to a conclusion, the participants were asked to consider the main lessons from the police's role in managing public order. From the community's perspective it was apparent that when situations and incidents were 'policed well' it was because everyone was aware of the key stakeholders' roles and responsibilities. In summarising it was dependent upon a number of factors:

- Pre-planning of events involving PSNI officers and members of the community at the local level
- Neighbourhood officers on the ground at the event mixing with Tactical Support Groups (TSGs), and engaging with members of the community
- An understanding from the public about the types of tactics and rationale employed by the police at particular events and in response to specific contexts

From the PSNI's perspective it was clear that events were easier to manage when it had an understanding of how the public would react to particular situations. The importance of pre-meetings with the community was stressed as crucial in alleviating fears and misunderstandings about the police's response and how it would manage situations. There was collective agreement from all participants that sharing information beforehand, recognising the challenges faced by all stakeholders, and being on the ground and facilitating dialogue between the PSNI and community, contributed to successful management of public order events.

5.7 Summary

The discussions revealed that the management and policing of public order events in Northern Ireland could have a number of detrimental impacts because the reporting of such events focuses on the negative aspects.

- At the local level there are risks to the relationships between the neighbourhood officer teams and residents.
- At the more strategic level, there is a risk to general public confidence in the institutions, along with the potential for dissident paramilitaries to use the violence as a platform to promote their position that policing hasn't changed.
- Finally, from an international perspective, incidents of violence and disorder with images of injured officers and members of the public can have a direct impact on the economy through levels of tourism and inward investment.

6 Managing transition

"I come from a community that never worked with the police, and all experiences were historically negative... so therefore, the current working relationships are both surprising and refreshing."

Loyalist representative

The third element of the roundtable discussions required participants to frame the issues that arose from both a community and a police perspective, in relation to managing the transitional period after the established political agreements and policing reforms. Drawing on first hand experiences, the participants held a series of productive discussions on the successes and failures that have defined the roles of the police and community in shaping the new dispensation for policing and community in Northern Ireland. Emerging themes included:

6.1 Information

According to participants one of the key drivers in facilitating the policing reforms in the transitional period was the level and quality of '*communication*' between the community and the PSNI. Essentially, where lines of communication between stakeholders were clear, open, genuine and consistent then both the PSNI and community reported positive relationships. However, when communication was instead characterised by un-truths and inconsistency experiences were negative, with people highly critical of the police response and generally disengaged from attempting to build meaningful relationships.

6.2 Consistency

When asked to explore what was meant by consistency and its overall importance in the transitional period, participants were keen to stress the various ways it helped them through this challenging time.

- **Message** – whether it was the community or the PSNI it was crucial that actions, behaviours and attitudes remained constant and consistent with what was expected.
- **Vision** – those that were committed to the 'new' policing arrangements had to constantly articulate their goals and outcomes. It was important that the community realised why the PSNI pursued particular agendas, and likewise it was crucial that the PSNI both understood and recognised the goals of the community. Essentially, both parties had to articulate a similar vision to avoid creating confusion or raising doubts about the processes of reform.

- **Approach and delivery of services** – the main point was that the PSNI with over 7,000 officers had to attempt to deliver a service that was consistent across Northern Ireland, while also acknowledging diverse needs and demands in different communities.
- **Community responses** – those from the community sector noted that there was a responsibility on them to react and engage with the PSNI in a consistent manner. They had to facilitate dialogue between the police and the wider community and be available to support the PSNI in addressing policing and community safety issues.

6.3 Leadership

It was evident from all of the participants that one of the key challenges throughout the transitional period was identifying and supporting leaders. These were individuals that were prepared to take risks, lead their respective communities and institutions, and who understood the challenges surrounding police reform. Furthermore, it was noted that even when there were crisis situations and the wider political institutions were at risk, these individuals continued to provide a vehicle for dialogue and communication. Upon reflection this was integral to the sustainability of police reform measures in the 'new' Northern Ireland.

6.4 Reducing political violence

As is the case in other societies emerging from long and protracted conflict, there are elements within marginalised communities that refuse to acknowledge the transformation from conflict to peace. In the case of Northern Ireland, dissident Republicans have continued with an armed campaign, targeting and killing PSNI officers and causing disruption through the planting of bombs. These dissident Republicans continue to try and recruit young people from Republican areas, using claims that policing has not been reformed and that they are discriminated against through oppressive police tactics such as stop and search and house searches. Furthermore, elements within the UVF (East Belfast) have continued to engage in activities that have included paramilitary threats, assaults and the orchestration of public disorder. It is incumbent upon community leaders and wider civil society to support the PSNI and instil the message that the rule of law is paramount.

6.5 Political stability

The sense from participants was that although policing was independent of the political institutions during the period of transition, it required a political commitment and affirmation of the rule of law. Where politicians have been unable to resolve their political differences then often the PSNI has become entangled in disputes and ended up policing the political fallout at the street level. For example, in recent years, the Northern Ireland Executive has been unable to address contentious issues around the legacy of the past, flags and parades. As a result there have been very public protests, and riots, which the police have had to manage.

6.6 Recognise contextual differences

It was evident from the discussions that the impact and challenges of transition have been experienced differently across communities in Northern Ireland. Some communities, often those most affected by the conflict, have struggled at times with the police reforms and new responsibilities placed on communities. Furthermore, issues around capacity, leadership, and resources are more prevalent in some areas, with a direct impact on the implementation and delivery of the community policing strategy.

Police on motorbikes patrol in Belfast. The community wanted to see the PSNI visibly engaging tactics that would reduce crime in their neighbourhoods.
© PSNI

6.7 Acknowledging organisational and personal sacrifices

Several respondents noted that as well as unqualified acceptance of the new arrangements, those in positions of authority (community and PSNI) were required to acknowledge both the impact and sacrifices made by everyone during the conflict. This took place at both a personal and institutional level and required more than acquiescence to the impact that reform had on large numbers of people:

- **Community** – it was important that people recognised the significance of the police reforms and the impact that they had on the policing institutions. From the police perspective, the transition was an emotional and sensitive time for many officers. It was, therefore, important that the community recognised the hurt experienced by many within the organisation.
- **Institutional** – it was also important that organisationally the PSNI understood and acknowledged the impact of police reform on the community. Prior to police reform a significant section of the community had never engaged with the police, and viewed the organisation with suspicion and disdain. In a short space of time, that same community was being told that the policing institutions were legitimate and were no longer to be seen as the 'enemy'.

The physical transformations of policing, such as uniform, name and symbols, occurred immediately. However, the psychological transformation took considerably longer, and this process required all parties to both acknowledge and accept the impact these changes had on all concerned.

6.8 Build a critical mass – institutions and public

There is no doubt about the challenges faced by communities and the PSNI implementing police reform after political agreement had been reached. According to all the participants, the key to building success centred on the need to build a collective critical mass of support for the transformative processes. Establishing a wave of 'goodwill' and recognition for the changes allowed for 'spoilers' to be isolated and prevented any toxifying of the mainstream reform processes. It was further reinforced that 'goodwill' alone was not enough, and that the process of transition was underpinned by collective determination, durability and commitment.

6.9 Accountability and transparency

In order to instil confidence in the new institutions it was clear that processes had to be underpinned by accountability and transparency. The policing institutions were therefore placed within a framework that established accountability at three distinct levels, with District Policing Partnerships, the Northern Ireland Police Ombudsman and the Northern Ireland Policing Board:

- **micro** – this was all about the police engaging with the community through personal contacts and being proactive in seeking out dialogue with local residents. Essentially, the PSNI were judged at the local neighbourhood level and were held accountable by their actions with local residents
- **meso** – within each district council, panels were established that consisted of local elected representatives and the community. Referred to as District Policing Partnerships they oversaw policing plans and created a forum were the PSNI could be challenged about specific policies and actions
- **macro** – the Northern Ireland Policing Board was created, made up of politicians and members of the public; it held the senior command policing team to account. Aside from the Board the Northern Ireland Police Ombudsman's Office was also established to allow people to lodge complaints about police actions

Together these mechanisms created a new environment of accountability and transparency, reinforcing the idea that this was a new era for policing and that the legitimacy of the organisation was not in question.

6.10 Managing expectations

In the early years of police reform roundtable participants acknowledged that the community's expectations of the PSNI, and the 'improvements to their community' it could deliver, were high. While noting that this was not necessarily a negative, it was stated that the practicalities around policing often made it difficult to meet these expectations. At particular times, issues of resourcing, the legacy of the conflict (PSNI has on-going statutory responsibility to investigate legacy crimes in the absence of a political and legislative solution), and the public prosecutions service, all had adverse effects on the ability of the PSNI to meet the public's expectations. This last point has been further compounded by the misunderstandings within communities about the different roles of the police and public prosecution service in prosecution decisions. In essence there was an education process which took place throughout the transitional process with the PSNI outlining its roles and responsibilities on policing and community safety. Furthermore, leaders within the community had to take on the role of facilitators and provide environments which allowed the PSNI and local communities to meet and build an understanding of what was achievable under specific circumstances.

It is also important to note that there was agreement from participants that other agencies and organisations had a role in influencing levels of expectation around policing reform, for example the Public Prosecution Service and other elements of the criminal justice system. The length of time surrounding prosecutions, bail restrictions and sentencing, had an impact on how the public viewed reform in the 'new' Northern Ireland. The PSNI had minimal or no control over these decisions.

6.11 Evolving process

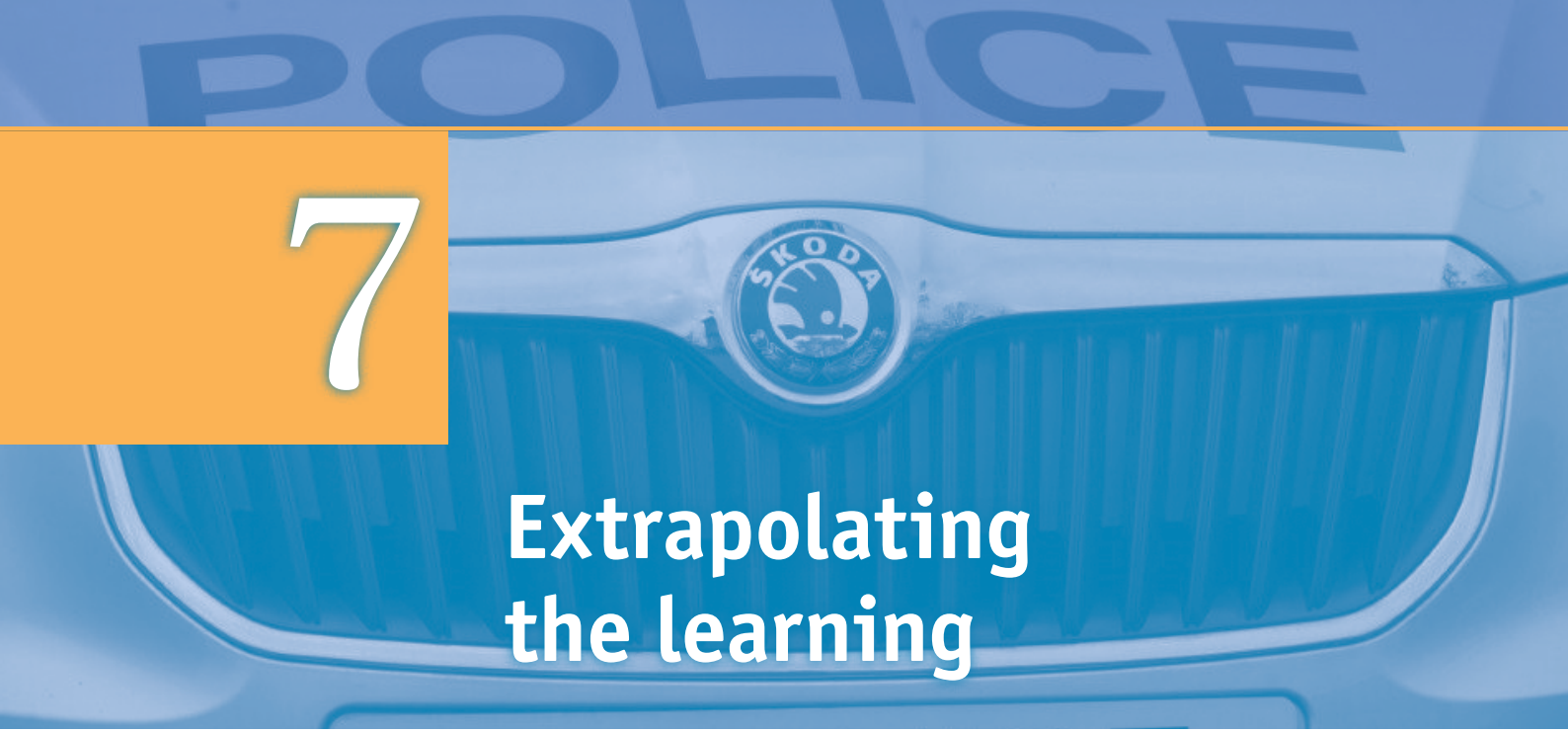
Participants were asked whether they felt that the transitional period was over, and that the policing reform journey had been completed. There was overwhelming support for the notion that policing and community safety, as strategies and processes involving the PSNI and community, were still evolving. In essence the journey never ends because by its very nature policing has to constantly transform to meet the diverse challenges that exist within communities. There was recognition that although the

initial issues surrounding community acceptance and legitimacy have largely been overcome, they have been replaced by new issues around the governance of security and the changing roles and responsibilities of the police service.

6.12 Summary

The discussions about managing police reforms through the transitional period underlined the importance of collective support for the move from conflict to peace and recognition of law and order:

- underpinning this period was a generosity and willingness from key individuals to take risks to ensure that both the PSNI and local communities had the opportunity to build the necessary relationships
- the challenges were not insurmountable but required a common vision among all parties of the relationship needed between police and communities and a long-term commitment to the rule of law
- communities and the police had to recognise that the legacy issues of the conflict were matters which they were not able to resolve. Therefore mechanisms for dialogue, engagement and accountability needed to be developed to deliver new relationships between police and communities
- during the transitional process it was important to manage expectations and promote accountability and transparency.



7

Extrapolating the learning

"Listen, trust doesn't happen overnight... but after several years of working in partnership, which hasn't been easy for communities or the police, there is certainly a high level of trust where there was previously none."

Republican representative

The process of developing lessons from the Northern Ireland experience underlines that police and security reform is challenging and complex work. However, through positive community and police engagement, it is possible to demonstrate the benefits of police reform, build momentum, and encourage wider community and police participation. The remainder of this section brings together the key points raised by the PSNI and community, particularly those which may have significance for other regions emerging from conflict.

From the PSNI perspective there are several points to note:

- It is important to recognise the need for strong leadership and risk taking throughout the reform process. On occasions, both the organisation itself and individuals had to make difficult decisions and without leadership progress might have been slower to achieve. **Within any reform process there must be mechanisms in place which allow the organisation to respond to specific incidents that require a deviation from the original plan.**
- The policing reform process that was undertaken in Northern Ireland upset and alienated a significant number of people. There is no doubting the hurt and anger experienced by many who both served and supported the police throughout the conflict. However, it was recognised that with reform came difficult decisions. The successful transformation of policing institutions required the organisation's management to introduce policy and cultural change that caused difficulty and even hurt to those that had contributed to policing during the conflict. **Jurisdictions undergoing similar reform processes must be aware that the main policing body will be challenged internally. They must be prepared to address these concerns while recognising the contribution and personal sacrifices made by those individuals during the conflict.**

Communication with local people has been key to community policing in Northern Ireland.
© PSNI

- One of the key requisites of the police reform process was to ensure the operational independence of the police. This was about removing any sense that the political institutions could inappropriately influence policing decisions, and thus call into question the legitimacy of the newly-formed institutions. **Any reform process must be clear and transparent and put in place mechanisms to ensure the police are not susceptible to political interference – or seen to be susceptible.**
- The police need to build relationships with the community that are not simply about upholding the rule of law. They are also about creating trust, engagement and becoming an integral part of the community. **It is important that any reform process places an emphasis on the 'human side' of policing and allows officers the time and resources to build meaningful links with the people they are serving.**
- The legacy of the past has the potential to damage public confidence in contemporary policing. As Northern Ireland society has moved away from conflict, there have been increasing calls from sections of the public to address incidents that occurred during the conflict involving the police along with paramilitaries. This has called into question the role of the police in investigating these incidents and significantly impacted on the resources of the organisation. **Any reform process must consider the organisational implications of dealing with the past, along with the role of the new organisation.**

From the community perspective there are a number of points which may have resonance in other areas emerging from conflict:

- Any process, whether it is at the macro (societal) or micro (neighbourhood) level must be underpinned by trust, confidence and respect. These are the qualities needed to ensure commitment and encourage local people that policing and security reforms will significantly improve their quality of life. **Any society undergoing police reform must ensure that the basic relationships are characterised by such qualities, and the onus is on the reformed institution to lead by example and ensure these themes dominate the public narrative. However, it also important to acknowledge that political and civic leadership is a necessary requirement for this to ultimately succeed.**

- There must be some form of recognition from the new police service that trust and respect have to be earned. This is not about holding the police to ransom, but is more about the police realising that the emotional legacy of conflict will not evaporate overnight. **It is imperative that newly established institutions can identify with their public and can acknowledge the issues that defined the previous organisation. They may not always agree with some communities' interpretations of the past, but they must at least recognise and acknowledge these attitudes.**

- Communities emerging from conflict find it challenging to both identify and build relationships with institutions. They find it much easier to associate with individuals and construct meaningful dialogue with specific officers. **Therefore the new institutions must encourage officers to establish personal links and associations with communities. Through these channels empathy between the public and the institution will emerge.**

- Communities need to be empowered and feel that they can actively contribute and participate in the newly established policing institution. One method of achieving this has been through consultation processes at both the micro and macro levels. **Throughout the transitional period it is important that the police create opportunities for consultation and engage their communities on issues important to them. However, it is crucial that the police use their increased knowledge to deliver real and practical change within communities.**

- As the police reform process takes shape communities begin to realise that 'policing' entails much more that the police. There is a growing awareness that other public bodies have a significant role in delivering policing and community safety initiatives. **It is important that any police reform process takes into consideration other public bodies and agencies such as health, education and employment to complement existing approaches around policing and community safety. The sharing of information between statutory and (where possible) community groups is key to identifying needs and prioritising appropriate resources to improve quality of life in communities.**

COVER PHOTO: A policeman talks to local residents in Belfast. Ongoing and transparent communication between the public and police has been key to building relationships between them.

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