How the interplay between organisational ‘culture’ and ‘climate’ shapes police officers’ perceptions of community policing

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Abstract
This article draws on interview data and the concepts of organisational ‘culture’ and ‘climate’ to critically assess police officers’ perceptions of community policing in one English constabulary. In so doing, it considers the cultural, organisational and wider contextual determinants of officers’ alignment to this style of police work. With an emphasis on developing community partnerships and engaging in problem-solving, rather than enforcement of the criminal law, community policing has been seen as a primary way of rendering officers more ‘responsive’ to the needs of citizens, improving police–community relations and driving down crime rates. An important reform movement in police organisations around the world, the success of community policing nonetheless depends on officers’ willingness and ability to deliver it. Accordingly, the generation of evidence about the ‘drivers’ of officers’ attitudes to inform strategies to promote the delivery of the approach is essential. Findings suggest that officers value community policing as an organisational strategy but that the approach maintains a low status and is undervalued compared with other specialisms within the organisation. This is born of an organisational culture that foregrounds law enforcement as the primary function of police work and an organisational climate that reinforces it. This has implications for community officers in terms of their perceptions of and attitudes towards the approach, self-esteem and sense of value and worth, perceptions of organisational justice, discretionary effort and role commitment. Recommendations for police managers are set out.

Keywords
community policing, police culture, police organisations

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Introduction
Drawing on the concepts of organisational ‘culture’ and ‘climate’, this article examines police officers’ perceptions of, attitudes towards, and experiences of community policing, a hugely influential reform movement in the United Kingdom (UK) and around the globe. Community policing models represent a departure from dominant modes of police work. Notably they represent a change from ‘traditional’ modes of police work framed narrowly around reactive enforcement of the criminal law – and so policing of communities – to modes of police work that foreground community engagement, problem-solving and proactive prevention of crime – and so policing with and for the community (Fielding, 1995). Community policing gained traction as an organisational strategy against the backdrop of
a crisis of police legitimacy, where communities, especially Black, Asian and Minority Ethnic communities, become detached from police organisations with implications for building trust and perceptions of legitimacy (see Reiner, 2010). Questions of police legitimacy continue to be debated around the world. The murder of George Floyd in Minnesota, USA in May 2020 has firmly placed the nature of the relationship between police organisations and the communities they serve in the political spotlight. The COVID-19 pandemic and the police enforcement of lockdown restrictions has put further strain on the police–public relationship, and questions remain about the longer-term impact of these events on confidence in policing and on perceptions of police legitimacy (see Jones, 2020). The answers to these questions, and maintenance of the police–public relationship, lie most clearly in the establishment of community policing models. It has been held that, through engagement and developing collaborative relationships with citizens based on fairness and respect, community policing will increase the legitimacy of police organisations (Myhill and Bradford, 2013; Myhill and Quinton, 2010). This being crucial if the police are to maintain and increase the compliance, cooperation and support of communities (Jackson et al., 2013; Mazerrolle et al., 2013).

**Community policing in the UK**

The development of community policing in the UK was heavily influenced by the vision of the former Chief Constable, John Alderson (Alderson, 1979; Reiner, 2010). Alderson (1979) opposed definitions of policing restricted to law enforcement and instead advocated crime prevention, community consultation and participation, and proactive policing delivered by dedicated teams of community officers (Alderson, 1979). ‘Neighbourhood policing’ is a dominant model operating in the UK at the time of writing and is used as an exemplar of community policing in this article. Concentrating on reducing crime through improving relationships between the police and the public and conducting collaborative problem-solving (Cosgrove and Ramshaw, 2015; Higgins, 2018; Myhill and Quinton, 2010; Quinton and Morris, 2008; Rogers, 2017; Tuffin et al., 2006), neighbourhood policing reflects the focus of community policing models more generally. Neighbourhood policing teams focus on increasing community engagement and being identifiable, accessible and responsive to the needs of local communities (Quinton and Morris, 2008; Rogers, 2017). In practice, this has involved conducting targeted foot patrols, increasing the visibility of police personnel, and capturing feedback from residents and multi-agency partners, and agreeing with them a set of priorities and solutions to solve local crime and disorder problems (Cosgrove and Ramshaw, 2015; Higgins, 2018; Myhill and Quinton, 2010; Quinton and Morris, 2008; Rogers, 2017; Tuffin et al., 2006).

**Aims and contribution of the article**

Despite the growing evidence-base to support and promote the theoretical benefits of service models like neighbourhood policing (see, for example, Jackson et al., 2013; Mazerrolle et al., 2013), empirical evidence about police officers’ attitudes to neighbourhood policing and the various cultural, organisational and contextual factors that shape them is needed (see Demirkol and Nalla, 2019; Myhill and Bradford, 2013). This is because, although community policing styles continue to be advocated by governments and police managers internationally, embedding them in police organisations has not been straightforward. If community policing is to be successful in meeting its mooted aims, then understanding the drivers of officers’ attitudes towards community policing, and how police managers might encourage support for such strategies – and in so doing facilitate its delivery – is essential. This includes ‘the situational context in which attitudes towards community policing are formed’ (Bennett and Morabito, 2006: 239). There is growing concern that neighbourhood policing is being eroded and that the police service is in danger of becoming too ‘reactive’ in its operations (Higgins, 2018; Higgins and Hales, 2017; Independent Police Commission, 2013; O’Neill, 2014). There is also evidence indicating that changes to police pay and conditions imposed by the Winsor Review (Winsor, 2011, 2012) are having a weighty bearing on officers’ day-to-day occupational experience and perceptions of internal fairness, and so organisational justice (Hoggett et al., 2014). By exploring the impact these entwined cultural, organisational and contextual factors have on officers’ attitudes toward neighbourhood policing in the current era, as well as their wider commitment to their role, this article aims to make an original contribution to current knowledge on policing. Making an important contribution to the existing literature, the findings illuminate the organisational and operational complexity that may undermine the implementation of neighbourhood policing in a fast-changing landscape.

**Conceptual and analytical approach**

This article draws on the concepts of organisational culture and climate to explain officers’ attitudes towards community policing. Within management studies, the concepts of culture and climate have been defined as conceptually distinct but overlapping constructs for understanding how employees understand/perceive their work settings, and
the meaning employees attach to them (Schneider and Barbera, 2015). Often considered distinct, academic work has increasingly seen the benefit of integrating the two (Schneider and Barbera, 2015).

Culture has been defined as the ‘normative beliefs (i.e. system values) and shared behavioural expectations (i.e. system norms) in an organization’ (James et al., 2008: 21). System norms refer to explicit, system-sanctioned behaviours that are expected because they are considered appropriate for members of a particular social system (James et al., 2008: 21). Cultural research focuses on understanding ‘the shared meaning employees derive about the basic assumptions, values, and beliefs that underlie their experiences at work, as transmitted to them via myths and stories they hear, especially in their socialization experiences to a new setting’ (Schneider and Barbera, 2015: 2). Culture is generated from a range of internal and external influences, some of which lie beyond managerial control (Wallace et al., 1999). This article reinforces the benefits of integrating the police culture literature with this wider literature on organisational cultures, utilising interview data to explore common patterns in officers’ normative beliefs, values and shared expectations in the context of community policing.

Within policing studies, culture is generally taken to refer to the informal assumptions, values and ‘craft’ rules that underpin and help officers make sense of their day-to-day experiences and which are transmitted across members (Cockcroft, 2013; Reiner, 2010). The notion of police culture has been used to explain what seems to be resistance to community policing (see, for example, Cosgrove and Ramshaw, 2015; Loftus, 2009; Myhill and Bradford, 2013). Specifically, the dominant cultural themes that are said to have undermined community policing initiatives are officers’ preference for action, their solidarity and isolation, an ‘us versus them’ outlook and inherent suspicion (Charman, 2017; Loftus, 2009; Myhill and Bradford, 2013; Reiner, 2010; Skogan, 2008). However, the concept of police culture is a contested one (see Cockcroft, 2013; Cordoner, 2017; Paoline, 2003, 2004; Reiner, 2010). First, culture is not monolithic. Studies have demonstrated the differences that characterise police officers’ occupational outlooks can result from factors such as different education, demographic background, experience in the organisation, rank, regional differences, (see, for example, Cordoner, 2017; Fielding, 1988; Holdaway, 1983; McCarthy, 2013; McLaughlin, 2007; Paoline, 2003, 2004; Reiner, 2010; Reuss-Ianni and Ianni, 1983; Westmarland, 2016). Second, culture changes. Indeed, the literature on police culture largely predates recent changes that have taken place within policing, such as the development of neighbourhood policing and changes to workforce composition (Charman, 2017; Cockcroft, 2013; Loftus, 2009). For example, Charman’s (2017) longitudinal research on the experiences of new recruits to a police force in England provides evidence to suggest that the cultural narratives of new recruits are contributing to the dilution of the traditionally dominant outlooks. According to Charman, new recruits adopt the identity of a ‘problem-solving communicator’ (2017: 272), giving rise to new cultural characteristics such as the ‘blue code of self-protection’, ‘compassion’ and ‘communication’ (2017: 339). More recently there has been a sustained period of government cuts in funding of the police, expansion of the policing task and reforms to police pay and conditions (Holdaway, 2017; Home Affairs Select Committee (HASC), 2018; Millie, 2013).

‘Climate’ is defined as ‘the individual employee’s perception of the psychological impact of the work environment on his or her own well-being’ (James et al., 2008: 20). It relates to perceptions of how an organisation deals with its members, which develop specifically from internal factors that are more clearly under managerial influence (Wallace et al., 1999). Climate research seeks to understand the shared meaning employees attach to the policies, practices, procedures and behaviours that are rewarded, supported and expected at work (Schneider and Barbera, 2015). Studies of organisational climate have revealed that perceptions of the work environment affect the ways that employees approach their work, shape social relationships and influence productivity (James et al., 2008; Schneider and Barbera, 2015; Wallace et al., 1999). ‘Dimensions of climate’ have been defined as: ‘leadership facilitation and support; workgroup cooperation, friendliness and warmth; conflict and ambiguity; professional and organisational esprit; job challenge, importance and variety; and mutual trust’ (James et al., 2008; Wallace et al., 1999).

Studies have demonstrated that perceptions of the police organisational climate shape the implementation of community policing (see, for example, Fielding and Innes, 2006; Skogan, 2008). We return to the findings of these studies as we present the findings from the present study. For now, suffice it to say that while there is much research evidence to suggest that the occupational outlooks of police officers might be incongruent with community policing, consideration must also be given to perceptions of the organisational climate that lie beyond yet interact with organisational culture.

Methods

Analytical approach

This article draws on a case study of a form of community policing – Neighbourhood Policing – which has been
dominant in the UK since its introduction in 2005. It draws on semi-structured interviews conducted with 17 police officers serving in a large, predominantly urban police force in England. Qualitative interviews facilitate an exploration of the perceptions and experiences of officers (Braun and Clarke, 2006), allowing for an in-depth understanding of the factors influencing officers’ attitudes to neighbourhood policing and understanding of their role in society, and enables participants to share their personal stories. Participants were identified through a combination of purposive and snowball sampling, each with direct experience of working directly within a community policing team for at least two years during their careers. Interviewees were initially contacted by email, provided with information about the research and options to arrange a time and location for interview, subject to their availability. Of those who volunteered to participate in the interviews, five were serving as police constables (PC), six as sergeants (PS/DS), and six at the rank of inspector or above. Nine participants were working in a uniformed role at the time of interview, and eight in non-uniformed, management or what might be considered ‘specialist’ roles (e.g. criminal investigation departments (CID), counter-terrorism, traffic). Interviewees’ length of service ranged from 2 to 32 years, with an average service length of 16 years. Five of the participants were women and 12 were men. All the interviews were conducted face-to-face between February and August 2016.

Participants were asked open-ended questions about their perceptions and experiences of and attitudes towards neighbourhood policing; motivations for joining the police; sources of job satisfaction; attitudes about the role of the police in modern society; and the effect of organisational factors (e.g. performance management, training) and wider contextual factors (e.g. economic context) on the status of neighbourhood policing, officers’ morale and commitment to their role. All the interviews were recorded digitally and then transcribed verbatim. All participants were anonymised and given pseudonyms. Once full verbatim transcription of all the interviews was completed, the data were organised and analysed thematically in accordance with the aims of the study (see Braun and Clarke, 2006). The familiarisation and analytic stage of the inquiry commenced during the repeated listening to the interview recordings and verbatim transcription. Initial thematic codes were established, and then refined and developed over time by repeatedly listening back to the interviews and reading transcripts, and quotes were used to bring life to officers’ perspectives and experiences. These quotes are provided in the following section to support the key themes from the analysis.

The paper now turns to consider the factors that influenced officers’ perceptions of, attitudes to and experiences of community policing and their roles in the police organisation. It is important to acknowledge here that our data are perceptions, rather than observed or measured behaviours. Although some commentators have argued that the cultural values, beliefs and attitudes of officers do shape their behaviour in the field (Shearing and Ericson, 1991), others have downplayed the effect of officers’ attitudes on their actions and behaviour while undertaking their duties (Waddington, 1999). We present our results as self-reported perceptions, albeit providing evidence that points to the impact of cultural and organisational factors on officers’ self-reported actions and behaviours.

Results

Perceptions of community policing

Despite the position of community policing as a major reform movement in the UK and around the world, many studies have observed negative attitudes to and resistance from rank-and-file police officers (Myhill and Bradford, 2013; Punch, 1979; Reiner, 2010; Skogan, 2008; Waddington, 1999; Westmarland, 2016). Somewhat in contrast, participants described positive perceptions of, attitudes towards and experiences of community policing. First, through developing meaningful relationships with citizens, participants perceived neighbourhood policing to be contributing to crime control and so meeting organisational aims (see also Cosgrove and Ramshaw, 2015). As PS Hanson explained: ‘If you’re involved in the community, you gather more intelligence, you become part of the community, people relate to you a little bit more, and I think all that lends itself to detecting crime’. Second, community policing was perceived to be making a long-term positive difference in communities and, accordingly, was experienced as rewarding (see also Higgins, 2018). PS Carter told us:

So response team was great, but you would be effectively nicking the same people over and over again. Would it change crime in the local area? Not really. Although I did some really good stuff, it was a little bit like firefighting […] Neighbourhoods was the first time I think that I felt well I’m not sure how long this effect is going to last, but actually I’ve done something that’s made a difference to people.

However, a consequence of perceptions of features of the organisational culture – perceptions of ‘real’ police work – and the organisational climate – perceptions of role allocation, specialisation, training, performance indicators, role clarity and mission creep, budgets and the retraction of community policing, austerity and perceptions of fairness – community policing was seen as undervalued.
or devalued within the organisation. Points to which we now turn.

Perceptions of ‘real’ police work

Studies have shown that police officers typically define their role predominantly in terms of fighting crime, and subsequently seek out and prioritise work that they consider to be exciting and full of action (Cain, 1973; Cockcroft, 2013; Cosgrove and Ramshaw, 2015; Fielding, 1988; Holdaway, 1983; Loftus, 2009; Manning, 1977; McCarthy, 2013; Myhill and Bradford, 2013; Reiner, 2010; Skogan, 2008). Reflecting these, participants drew attention to a perception that the activities associated with community policing, such as community engagement and collaborative problem-solving, were devalued in comparison with fast time response to calls for service and enforcement of the criminal law by members of the organisation (see also Davies and Thomas, 2008; Fielding, 1995; Higgins, 2018). Comparing response policing with neighbourhood policing PC McMain described how:

It’s not as Gucci. It’s not as exciting, definitely not as exciting. I think they’ve (neighbourhood officers) got a bit of a reputation around laziness, but that’s not the case. I mean they’re not answering 999 calls running on blue lights, because they’re not in cars a lot of the time. Going to fetes and things like that isn’t seen as ‘real’ police work, to some.

Likewise, PC Green explained that:

I think with [neighbourhood policing] they are a bit more relaxed; they sit around and have a cup of tea in the morning or the afternoon, they haven’t got to get straight out […] in my eyes it’s not really what I would call policing.

As the quotes suggest, neighbourhood policing then may diverge from what some officers perceive to be ‘real’ policing (also see Fielding, 1988, 1995; Loftus, 2009; Manning, 1977; McCarthy, 2013). Consequently, participants perceived that the activities associated with neighbourhood policing were not prioritised by all in the organisation. As PC Anya noted: ‘At a local level then neighbourhood policing does get the recognition it deserves. Wider than that I am not necessarily sure it does, it perhaps isn’t seen as a priority by other teams’. A perception that neighbourhood policing was not real policing, may leave those posted in neighbourhood roles vulnerable to marginalisation (see, for example, Fielding, 1995; Waddington, 1999). PC Piper explained that:

even the other day I found out that they even have views that we are lazy and all the teams’ view that we’re lazy. So unless they actually do that role and get made to do it, they don’t understand what’s involved in it. That can be frustrating.

As the quote suggests, this marginalisation may be attributed to enduring misconceptions about the work of neighbourhood teams which can be frustrating for community officers who may struggle to cultivate credibility. As PS Carter put it: ‘when I was on neighbourhoods there was certainly a bit of justifying what you do and trying to convince people that actually it made a difference’.

Role allocation

Perception of the ways that roles were allocated within the constabulary was influencing the status accorded to community policing and attitudes towards conducting this mode of police work. Participants overwhelmingly expressed concern that neighbourhood teams typically comprised a mix of new recruits who were obliged to spend a period there to complete their probation, older officers who were nearing retirement and lacked motivation, and managers who lacked the necessary skills to tutor their junior colleagues (see also Fielding, 1995; Hamilton-Smith et al., 2014; Higgins, 2018). This combination of new recruits – considered to be lacking the necessary experience – and undermotivated supervisors, as one participant put it: ‘certainly doesn’t do much to help the reputation of neighbourhoods’ (PC Begum) (see also Hamilton-Smith et al., 2014; Higgins, 2018). It also limits the supervision and professional development opportunities for those joining neighbourhood teams (see also Fielding, 1995; Hamilton-Smith et al., 2014; Higgins, 2018). As PC Anya said: ‘I don’t think it is good to post all our recruits here, especially because it is an environment which is not renowned for giving officers a great deal of support or mentoring’. Likewise, PC Green reflected that: ‘I think that’s the big thing, the leadership of the sergeants, at times, it’s not very inspiring or motivating for their team. Your better, hardworking sergeants tend to be in response or other specialist teams and stay there’. Any skills gaps stemming from the composition of neighbourhood teams are ultimately likely to moderate the confidence officers have in neighbourhood policing and undermine its impact (Fielding, 1995, 2018; Hamilton-Smith et al., 2014; Higgins, 2018).

Furthermore, mandatory deployment to neighbourhood teams was perceived to result in ‘a lot of police officers on neighbourhoods that don’t want to be there’ (PC Piper) and so move quickly to what they see as more desirable roles in the organisation. PC Green explained:
you’ve got people that are doing it just because they have to do it […] Everyone I speak to on neighbourhoods says, ‘I can’t wait to get out on a response team’. People don’t want to be on […] Neighbourhoods. If you’ve got people that don’t want to be there, it’s not going to work.

PS McMain also explained how the mandatory posting to neighbourhood roles was perceived to adversely impact on the commitment of officers to these roles and subsequently, the continuity and success of the neighbourhood model:

We used to have people in neighbourhood roles who wanted to be there. We used to apply for it. Now we’re forcing people into the roles who don’t particularly want to be there, so it defeats the objective. With neighbourhood policing you really need people in there for years.

The ways that officers were allocated to neighbourhood policing teams was perceived to influence attitudes towards community policing in other ways. Participants suggested that police managers actively prioritise deploying the most able officers to ‘specialist’ areas, leaving the least able to neighbourhood policing teams. PS Begum, for example, noted: ‘Neighbourhoods has often been seen, and this will not be written down anywhere, as a place where you send people who can’t take the pace’. Likewise, participants perceived that managers may send officers who were deemed to be occupationally incompetent ‘back to uniform’, in favour of protecting and prioritising the activities of specialist investigative branches. As DS Davies stated: ‘if you’re in CID and you’re not very good, well you’re being sent back out to neighbourhoods. That’s why that stigma probably comes in’.

Specialisation

Police organisations are increasingly complex and may provide officers with opportunities to specialise in areas such as cybercrime, fraud, firearms, serious and organised crime, counterterrorism, and diplomatic protection (Higgins, 2018; Reiner, 2010). Participants’ accounts provided evidence to suggest that increasing specialist opportunities might be serving to aggravate the low status afforded to neighbourhood policing. First, participants suggested that many officers view neighbourhood postings merely as a ‘career stepping-stone’ (Higgins, 2018: 4) to response or higher status non-uniformed roles. DS Davies explained how:

there are so many different departments, so many specialisms. You can do neighbourhood policing on the streets forever or you could be royalty protection, firearms rifleman, helicopter observer, dog holder or murder investigator. There are so many different things and you want to taste a bit of all of that, so I wouldn’t blame people for saying right, I only want to do neighbourhoods for the shortest period I can.

Second, the specialist roles were perceived to achieve a higher status than neighbourhood policing roles. And more generally, may appeal more to officers:

Neighbourhood policing is often the first impression recruits get of the organisation, and because they are so eager to pursue specialist routes and exciting roles when they join, neighbourhood policing might actually have long term implications for job satisfaction and morale as it does not necessarily live up to this billing! It is not seen as a long-term career path for most because it is not exciting, there’s not much drama and it can be repetitive. (PC Anya)

That clear boundaries have been drawn between neighbourhood policing and higher status specialist roles, help explain why neighbourhood officers are prone to marginalisation and isolation within the occupational culture (see also McLaughlin, 2007; Waddington, 1999). There are also implications for the continuity of the approach as officers seek to move quickly from neighbourhood roles (see also Fielding, 1995; Hamilton-Smith et al., 2014)

Training

The nature and availability of training influenced perceptions of neighbourhood policing (see also Chappell, 2009; Fielding, 1988, 1995, 2018; Higgins, 2018; Skogan et al., 2015). Participants drew attention to perceptions that the training and development opportunities for the skills needed for effective community policing – particularly in equipping officers with appropriate communication and interpersonal skills – were either not provided or were inadequate (see also Fielding, 1988; Skogan, 2008). Reflecting on training for the community policing role, PS Begum stated: ‘There isn’t any at all. When there is some it’s quite superficial’. For DCI Jones: ‘we train quite a lot of knowledge, but not actually how, not actually skill for example in terms of interacting with someone’. Asked about whether he had received any training in how to engage with citizens, PC Gooding replied: ‘Oh god no […] There’s very little exposure to scenarios really at training, proper scenarios and getting you properly used to it’. In the absence of quality formal training, and notably in the areas of communication and interaction with communities, the likelihood of neighbourhood policing being implemented successfully and achieving a more prestigious status is clearly weakened (see also Fielding, 1995; Higgins, 2018). A further implication is that officers may well
move into other areas of the organisation in pursuit of professional development. PC Gooding went so far as to describe neighbourhood policing as a test of endurance rather than an environment in which police can develop professionally: ‘You have to serve your time there because if you want to skill up, so if you want to get a response course, a Taser course or any sort of element of change or expansion, you’ve got to go to a response team’.

**Performance indicators**

A perception that performance indicators for neighbourhood officers were unsuitable influenced attitudes towards and experiences of neighbourhood policing. Rather than emphasising the competencies required for community policing (such as interpersonal skills, problem-solving and partnership working), performance management processes were perceived to emphasise competencies associated with law enforcement (such as numbers of arrests, detection rates and response times) (see also Chappell, 2009; Fielding and Innes, 2006; Gorby, 2013; Moore and Braga, 2003). The performance management framework to incentivise the implementation of neighbourhood policing (e.g. effective community engagement, collaborative problem-solving) was perceived to be inadequate (Chappell, 2009; Fielding and Innes, 2006; Gorby, 2013; Moore and Braga, 2003). As PC Green noted: ‘You’ve got the area commanders and all they’re looking at is the crime figures, they’re not looking at anything else’. Participants drew attention to how the lack of performance management indicators meant community officers found it difficult to demonstrate their effectiveness (see also Chappell, 2009; Fielding and Innes, 2006; Gorby, 2013). As PS Begum explained:

> A lot of the work that neighbourhood officers do is the kind of stuff that is harder to measure, the community engagement, the prevention, how much you prevent from happening. So, for example, you leaflet drop a whole street and tell people to lock their windows and shut their doors when they go out – you may well have prevented two or three of those houses being burgled that week – but how do you demonstrate that?

Not being able to demonstrate effectiveness resulted in perceptions of lower job satisfaction and a weakened sense of role commitment. As PC Piper stated: ‘We don’t get noticed for anything we do, either at a local or broader level, which is very frustrating. Because they can’t add figures to our role, no one takes any notice […] Sometimes it makes you wonder why you even do it’. As the quote indicates, the way officers’ performance is currently measured does little to incentivise engagement in neighbourhood policing (Bennett and Morabito, 2006; Chappell, 2009). Further, it unintentionally signals that the organisation cares little about success and the quality of delivery of neighbourhood policing and long-term crime prevention, instead rewarding and reinforcing the traditionally dominant leaning toward crime-fighting and response activities (Cosgrove and Ramshaw, 2015; Fielding and Innes, 2006; Moore and Braga, 2003; Reiner, 2010).

**Role clarity and mission creep**

A long-standing issue in police organisations (Manning, 1977), participants suggested that role ambiguity was acute for those officers deployed to community teams (see also Charman, 2017; Fielding, 1995; O’Neill, 2014). This was the result of vague definitions of community policing, lack of objectives and purpose, and changes to the community policing remit over time (see also Higgins, 2018). PC Gooding explained that:

> the message isn’t very clear. They’re not saying just go out and nick people, they’re saying do a bit of investigation, do a little bit of community policing, cover the wards, do a bit of presence and reassurance. The mission’s not very clear and it changes from week to week.

This can be a source of stress for officers (see also Rizzo et al., 1970; Manning, 1977; Willis and Mastrofski, 2016). For PS Begum: ‘We have become a jack-of-all-trades in many ways, which itself can be really, really stressful for a lot of cops’. For PC Anya:

> As a neighbourhood officer you encounter a whole variety of crime and anti-social behaviour. There is a horrible middle-ground though – domestics, civil disputes etc. – things that are not really police issues but could turn into police issues. It’s quite complex at times I suppose, and obviously that can make you feel unsettled and it is probably why folk don’t stick around for long.

Contradictory expectations and pressures on community officers, stemming from narrowly framed performance measures that do not reflect the realities of their role, were perceived to accentuate police officers’ sense of role ambiguity (Fielding, 1995; Manning, 1977 O’Neill, 2014; Reiner, 2010; Waddington, 1999). As Superintendent Brown noted: ‘I imagine if you look for a role profile for a modern police officer, you wouldn’t find one that manages to encompass everything that we do. I think that’s one of the major challenges’.
Budgets and the retraction of community policing

Since 2010 there have been significant changes to police terms and conditions and cuts to police budgets and subsequently staffing levels (see, for example, HASC, 2018; Higgins, 2018). A consequence of cuts to police budgets and staffing levels, participants reported a dilution and fragmentation of community policing teams and retreat to a more ‘reactive’ policing (HASC, 2018; Higgins, 2018; O’Neill, 2014; Rogers, 2017). Community officers were diverted from their intended core duties of proactive engagement, reassurance and problem-solving to meet the intelligence and reactive crime-fighting demands of the organisation (see also Cosgrove and Ramshaw, 2015; Higgins, 2018; O’Neill, 2014). This was a matter of concern for participants. First, it was perceived to aggravate mission creep (also see Higgins, 2018; O’Neill, 2014):

The challenges at the moment are to do with numbers, staffing. I think we have got sufficient numbers involved in neighbourhood policing […] But, well there’s another tier of policing which is the response. So the idea of the response officers is that they are there to take the emergency calls, so that we don’t, so that we’re able to get on with our other work. But we haven’t got a sufficient number of response officers to do that, so you end up being both roles, so it waters down the neighbourhood policing function. (PS Hanson)

Second, as the quote suggests, it ‘waters down the neighbourhood policing function’ (PS Hanson) and significantly undermined the officers’ ability to deliver activities associated with community policing such as engaging with residents. For PC Gooding:

I just don’t think we have enough people to carry out that traditional feel of policing and make a real impact in local communities. The ward teams are on shift patterns, so there will be large chunks of the time – in fact a couple of days will probably go by – when even if you are actively looking for police officers as a member of the public they won’t be there […] If it’s just four people, who then are walking in pairs and they are just constantly getting harassed for calls, because they are, then the local policing model fails. Everyone knows that it fails. We are only equipped to be reactive.

Third, it was perceived to undermine the recognition afforded to neighbourhood policing. As PC Naylor put it:

I think they (Neighbourhood Teams) get a really tough time […] they get shafted a lot with aid and appointment car, which makes everyone think that they’re not doing any ‘real’ policing. I just don’t think they get the time that they need to engage in communities, which is their whole purpose, because they’re being abstracted.

Austerity, organisational change, and perceptions of fairness

In turn, the interview accounts indicated that cuts to police budgets, reductions in overtime pay and alterations to conditions imposed by the Winsor Review (Winsor, 2011, 2012) were bearing on officers’ day-to-day occupational experience and perceptions of internal fairness and so organisational justice (Hoggett et al., 2014). According to participants, this was having a detrimental impact on their morale and role commitment (Brunetto et al., 2012; Dick, 2011; Dick and Metcalfe, 2001). PS Hanson told us that: ‘There’s far more of our officers that have left recently and that’s due to a mixture of low pay, a lack of support they felt from the organisation, and you know, just the cuts in general really […] Morale is very, very low’. PC Anya noted the potential repercussions of austerity and declining organisational justice on neighbourhood officers’ overall long-term commitment to their role:

A lot of officers I work with feel fatigued by the whole austerity agenda. People have been pushed to breaking point. I think a lot of officers are just tired with the general set up, reforms. There is lots of stuff to do with pay, pensions and I think that’s why more officers are starting to consider what skills they have and what jobs they could do elsewhere.

Nearly all the officers interviewed discussed the repercussions of the Winsor Review and government austerity on morale and reported a perceived shift in their normative behaviour from ‘goodwill’ to ‘work to rule’. As PC Naylor stated: ‘People don’t want to bend over backwards to make the job work anymore […] I think now it’s a lot more work to rule’. In the absence of overtime, PS McMain described ‘there is no goodwill. There’s none left. […] In the past, when you had a job in, you would work until it’s done; doesn’t matter what time you finish, you work until it’s done. Now I’d say you work until the end of your shift and you go home’. Officers explained how the onset of ‘a work to rule’ outlook was undermining the quality-of-service provided. For PC Gooding: ‘you struggle with the basics of victim care because you’re always conscious of the finish time, you know you’re not going to get paid […] you’re getting off as quick as you can’.

Discussion and implications

Aimed at improving relationships between the police and the communities they serve, community policing is an influential reform movement around the world. However, its success depends on officers’ willingness and ability to deliver it. This makes understanding perceptions of and attitudes towards this mode of police work important. In
contrast to many other studies which have demonstrated resistance to community policing, we found that officers valued the approach as a means of attaining organisational aims and community policing was experienced as rewarding. However, we also find that activities associated with community policing were perceived to be undervalued in comparison with other organisational roles (see also Fielding, 1995; Higgins, 2018; Waddington, 1999). We argue that this was the result of a combination of features of the police organisational culture and climate. Despite changes in the police organisation and workforce composition (see also Charman, 2017; Loftus, 2009), a strong cultural emphasis on the action-oriented aspects of the police role and the enforcement of the criminal law endures. This may serve to devalue of activities associated with community policing which in turn are not prioritised by officers relative to other functions within the police organisation and play second fiddle to ‘the 999 Gucci stuff’ (Inspector Duckworth) (see also Cain, 1973; Davies and Thomas, 2008; Fielding, 1995; Holdaway, 1983; Loftus, 2009; Manning, 1977; Reiner, 2010; Waddington, 1999; Westmarland, 2016).

However, police culture is routinely (perhaps often too readily) ‘blamed’ for the failure of reform efforts in policing (see, for example, Charman, 2017; Skogan, 2008). Indeed, we found cultural devaluing of community policing to be reinforced by perceptions of aspects of the organisational climate. Notably, perceptions of the ways that roles were allocated within constabularies, increasing specialist opportunities, supervision of community officers, training and professional development, the nature of performance indicators, role clarity and mission creep, and funding cuts and reform of police pay and conditions. All of these have implications for officers’ attitudes towards the approach, their self-esteem and sense of value and worth, and perceptions of organisational justice, discretionary effort and role commitment. Hence attempts to implement community policing must be supported by changes to organisational practices and policies. Our analysis, and review of the literature, point to several structural, organisational and wider contextual matters that need consideration by police managers to facilitate the implementation and delivery of community policing.

First, perceptions of the composition of neighbourhood teams might hamper the status, and application and quality of community policing (see also Fielding, 1995; Hamilton-Smith et al., 2014; Higgins, 2018). The mandatory posting of new officers together with more experienced, undermotivated superiors and officers who have performed poorly in other parts of the organisation sends signals that community policing is undervalued by the organisation (see also Fielding, 1995; Hamilton-Smith et al., 2014; Higgins, 2018) and limits professional development opportunities for those joining neighbourhood teams (Hamilton-Smith et al., 2014; Higgins, 2018). This increases the likelihood of officers’ leaving their neighbourhood roles to pursue a career in other parts of the organisation and in so doing, undermining the continuity and implementation of the community policing approach (see also Fielding, 1995; Hamilton-Smith et al., 2014; Higgins, 2018), and has detrimental effect with regards to the passing on of knowledge and skills (Hamilton-Smith et al., 2014). Hence, officers and other staff should be allocated to community policing roles because they have the skills and capabilities to meet these job requirements and can ultimately thrive in roles focused on engaging communities and solving entrenched community problems – not because they have performed poorly elsewhere, are considered too ‘inexperienced,’ or indeed lack the skills and motivation to work in other areas of the organisation.

Second, specialist posts that align with the crime-fighting culture hold more internal prestige, are generally seen as more attractive and offer better professional development opportunities. This has consequences for the status and continuity of community policing because officers were inclined to move quickly into specialist posts, using community policing merely as a springboard to do so (Fielding, 1995; Higgins, 2018). The ‘careerist concerns’ (Fielding, 1995: 62) of officers and lack of recognition for neighbourhood policing as a professional and credible career path present a clear challenge to its implementation and continuity (Higgins, 2018). Police organisations need to improve the status of neighbourhood policing as a specialism, in and of itself, and to embed the role of neighbourhood teams firmly within organisational structures.

Third, our analysis revealed relatively little in the way of formal training for neighbourhood officers (see also Higgins, 2018; Myhill and Bradford, 2013; Rogers, 2017). This does nothing to elevate perceptions of the professional status of the neighbourhood model or the attractiveness of the role as a longer-term career path, and so may act as a barrier to the successful implementation and delivery of community policing. The current training model seemingly affords more value to operational and legislative knowledge than the development of communication and interpersonal skills that officers themselves consider to be so integral to effectively fulfil their duties. Linked to training is the wider issue of professional development. There is a need for greater investment in this function, which would include developing a body of professional knowledge for neighbourhood officers and promoting ongoing training and development. The College of Policing’s Neighbourhood Policing Guidelines (College of Policing, 2018) draw attention to the need for improvements in the professional development of neighbourhood
officers in five key areas, namely: community engagement, partnership working, prevention, problem-solving and procedural justice.

Fourth, performance indicators continue to emphasise ‘blue light policing’, signalling to officers that the organisation is more concerned with measuring outputs associated with crime-fighting rather than with the processes by which effective community policing is achieved. This serves to further undermine the status of community policing and can weaken job satisfaction for community officers (see also Gorby, 2013; Manning, 1977; Moore and Braga, 2003; Weisburd et al., 2006; Willis and Mastrofski, 2016). The implications are clear: organisational and individual performance indicators must better align to the core objectives of the neighbourhood policing role to incentivise longer-term commitment to the role of police officers (see also Fielding and Innes, 2006; Gorby, 2013; Moore and Braga, 2003). The integration of qualitative evidence would help neighbourhood officers evaluate and document their performance (Fielding and Innes, 2006), whilst encouraging greater reflexivity in operational practice (Wood and Williams, 2016). This has links to the observed absence of mission clarity for community officers who may experience competing demands and expectations (role conflict) and feel their job is vague or ill defined (role ambiguity) (Rizzo et al., 1970). This provides more evidence for the need to develop performance management frameworks that are closely attuned to the realities of police work as well as a clearer definition of what neighbourhood policing is for (HASC, 2018; Higgins, 2018). Indeed guidelines published by the College of Policing (2018) acknowledge that neighbourhood policing had been eroded and that many forces had failed to ‘redefine’ neighbourhood policing in the context of reduced budgets and changing demand.

Lastly, funding cuts and reforms to police pay and conditions and government austerity were perceived to be unfair and served to weaken officers’ commitment to their role, morale and willingness to engage in extra-role activity (see also Hogget et al., 2014; Quinton et al., 2015) and heightened neighbourhood officers’ intentions to leave the organisation (see also Brunetto et al., 2012; Dick and Metcalfe, 2001). Wider economic and political pressures, most pervasively the conditions of public sector austerity, are tied to officers’ perceptions of organisational fairness. To elevate officers’ alignment to neighbourhood policing as well as their wider motivation and commitment to their role, promoting organisational justice should be the key focus for police managers. Consistent with the key dimensions of organisational justice – distributive, procedural and interactional justice (Colquitt, 2008; Greenberg, 2011) – police forces and policy officials must work together to improve the outcomes officers receive (i.e. pay, pensions and professional development). And crucially, to ensure officers feel engaged in the process of reform, that they receive information on decisions that are made and that their feedback is heard (Hogget et al., 2014; Myhill and Bradford, 2013; Quinton et al., 2015).

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