

## Exploring public confidence in the police and local councils in tackling crime and anti-social behaviour

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This report provides findings from discussion groups held with local residents across England and Wales on the reasons underpinning responses to a question in the British Crime Survey (BCS) that measures public confidence in the police and local council to tackle crime and anti-social behaviour (ASB). Eighteen groups took place between 18 January and 3 February 2010. Participants were given a questionnaire to complete at the beginning and end of each discussion group which included the BCS question; responses were then used to prompt discussion during the course of the groups. The main implications for how to improve public confidence are as follows.

- Increasing awareness of the role and work undertaken by the police and council in tackling crime and ASB is perceived to be key to improving public confidence. This is particularly important with respect to Neighbourhood Policing and understanding the role of the local council. Passive communication, using a channel that people are already engaged with, e.g. radio, is perceived to be effective in building this awareness.

- Engaging the public with the police and council should be made as straightforward as possible to encourage community involvement. Engagement activities need to be taken to residents in environments in which they are comfortable or through existing channels.
- Providing prompt feedback on the outcomes of cases was seen as an important means of providing reassurance that action is being taken.
- Any local agreement setting out public standards of service should: be concise and user-friendly; be firm in its promises, therefore underlying the intention to fulfil them; provide guidance on how to hold the police and/or council to account.
- More information could be provided on: the council's role in dealing with crime and ASB; the activities being undertaken to address these issues; the impact of community consultation on the council's ASB policy; and a clear guide on who to contact in the council and expected response times.

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### Keywords

Policing  
Community policing  
Confidence in the police  
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- Local councils can play a role in facilitating greater dialogue between residents and the police. People appear to be engaging with the council through meetings, newsletters and other forums, and these means can be used to provide feedback on crime and ASB issues.
- Neighbourhood Policing appears to fit the public's desired model of policing but awareness needs to be improved if Neighbourhood Policing is to be effective in raising confidence. Participants said they would welcome the opportunity to meet their Neighbourhood Policing Teams in person, in informal settings, as well as to have a greater involvement in local priority setting.
- Participants were unconcerned with the mechanics of local partnerships; they were more interested in the outcomes. One of the most popular initiatives appeared to be a single non-emergency number. While this was felt to simplify the reporting of issues, it needed to result in clear action being taken for it to have the potential to raise confidence.

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### Context

The main tool for measuring public perceptions of the police is the British Crime Survey (BCS). A question to measure confidence in the effectiveness of the police in tackling crime and anti-social behaviour (ASB) was introduced into the BCS in October 2007. Analysis of the first 12 months of data collection found that 46 per cent of respondents agreed with the statement “the police and local councils were dealing with the ASB and crime issues that matter locally” and this increased to 50 per cent in the year to September 2009. A large proportion of respondents indicated ‘no opinion’ as their response (29 per cent in both the year to September 2008 and the year to September 2009).

While previous research has identified some behaviours and attitudes that can increase confidence in the police, it is by no means exhaustive. There is also a lack of evidence on how to build confidence in the way local councils address crime and ASB. To expand the evidence base, this study was commissioned to explore in-depth reasons underpinning responses to the new BCS confidence question and the public’s views on initiatives (in place at the time of the research) that sought to improve confidence.

### Approach

Discussion groups were held in ten police force areas in England and Wales between 18 January and 3 February 2010. These forces were chosen to represent varying levels of confidence, built environments and geographic coverage. Participants were recruited to be representative of the ethnic make-up of the local population and to provide a mix of ages (between 18 and 59), gender and social class. They were also chosen to reflect a range of confidence levels. Two types of discussion group were used.

- 1. Ten action planning group discussions with 13-17 participants in each.** The purpose of these groups was to create an environment conducive to debate on new initiatives and public priorities.
- 2. Eight mini-group discussions with three to eight participants in each.** The purpose of the mini-groups was to gain an understanding of what influences confidence from as wide a range of audiences as possible, particularly from those who might be classified as ‘seldom heard’. These were held with the elderly (60- to 80-year-olds), Muslim women, Muslim men, people from the Afro-Caribbean community, unemployed, young male adults (16- to 19-year-olds), young female adults (16- to 19-year-olds) and those that strongly disagree that the police and local council are doing a good job.

Topics covered in the group discussions included:

- perceptions and experience of the local police and council and how they deal with ASB and crime;
- perceptions and experience of: partnership working, Neighbourhood Policing, and the Policing Pledge,<sup>1</sup> and how they could improve confidence;
- participants’ own ideas for raising confidence;
- reasons for positive, negative and indifferent responses to the BCS confidence question and what could change participants’ own response.

Participants were given a questionnaire to complete at the beginning and end of the discussion. Both questionnaires included the confidence question used in the BCS and initial responses were used to prompt discussion during the course of the groups. Before each discussion group, two telephone interviews were held with a key contact

<sup>1</sup> The Policing Pledge was a national set of minimum standards that all forces were expected to achieve. The Pledge is no longer government policy in line with commitments to minimise targets and allow forces more discretion in setting local policing agendas.

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from each of the local police and local council to help gain further insight into the current local initiatives being used in each area. The initiatives were then included as a theme in the discussion.

## Results

Levels of confidence were found to be influenced by both personal experience and information. Word-of-mouth and media stories were the most influential in shaping participants' perceptions of the police, while perceptions of the local council were largely driven by its perceived efficiency in 'getting things done', particularly in dealing with traditional services such as housing and waste collection, rather than ASB and crime.

### *Partnership working*

Participants' awareness of partnership working between the police, local councils and other local agencies was low, but there was general support for the concept. Participants tended to be less interested in the mechanics of how a partnership would work and more interested in the outcomes.

Participants felt uninformed about which council teams or departments were supposed to deal with ASB and crime, making it difficult to raise concerns or report incidents. Participants said they would like more information on: the council's role in dealing with crime and ASB; the activities being undertaken to address these issues; the impact of community consultation on the council's ASB policy; and a clear guide on who was best placed to report issues to in the council.

A popular partnership-working initiative was a single non-emergency telephone number to report minor crime and ASB incidents. While this was seen as a way of making reporting easier, participants felt that clear action would need to be taken by the police and council (and feedback provided to the individual concerned) for it to have the potential to raise public confidence.

### *Neighbourhood Policing*

Participants' awareness of Neighbourhood Policing was generally low; not all participants were aware of it operating in their local area. However, when asked to describe their preferred style of policing, most participants described something which bore the hallmarks of Neighbourhood Policing. There were mixed views of Police Community Support Officers (PCSOs); while many had heard of them there was confusion about

their role. Participants who had experienced contact with PCSOs tended to speak of them more highly than those who had not.

Participants suggested a number of awareness-raising and engagement initiatives that could help bolster public confidence in the police and local councils in tackling crime and ASB. These included: meeting with the public (e.g. 'meet and greet' sessions, door-knocking); increased communication with the public (e.g. radio and television appearances); and helping the public to give feedback (e.g. mobile police diary room).

### *Local agreements of expected standards of service*

Participants were generally unaware of a national agreement on minimum standards from the police in place at the time of the research (the Policing Pledge). Participants expressed concern that the Pledge was simply Public Relations (PR) or spin and they did not believe that the level of services 'pledged' was actually provided. Some participants, however, viewed it more positively, perceiving that it could help them hold the police to account.

Three themes emerged as important to participants when making a local agreement with the public about the standards of service expected from the police.

- **Credibility** – the public must perceive the agreement to be firm, realistic and achievable.
- **Accountability** – the public must know how to use the agreement to hold their local police to account when service standards are not met.
- **Clarity** – the agreement must be clear and succinct to make it accessible to all members of the local community.

### *Understanding perceptions of those with 'no opinion'*

Participants reported three main reasons for giving a 'neither/no response' to the BCS confidence question. First, some participants felt unqualified to give an opinion, particularly where they had no direct experience of the police or council; they simply lacked sufficient knowledge to form an answer. Secondly, some participants selected this response to reflect the balance of positive and negative experiences of the police and council. Thirdly, some participants experienced difficulty in comprehending the question due to what they saw as ambiguous wording, and therefore gave a 'neither agree nor disagree response'.