



Police Integrity: in the opinion of the general public

Research for Her Majesty's Inspectorate of Constabulary (HMIC)

Findings – 14th October 2011

Research objectives:

To contribute to HMIC's understanding of what the general public consider to be inappropriate relationships for the police, i.e. undue influence, inappropriate contractual arrangements and other abuses of power in police relationships with the media and other parties.

To establish the extent to which the public think certain activities by police raise questions about their integrity, when thinking about police officers in general, or when thinking about Chief Constables.

Research method:

4 group discussions and 12 depths interviews with the general public, 18+ men and women, across social class and ethnic groups.

Recruitment filtered out those who had recently been victims of crime or arrested or charged with an offence. Also, those who held extreme opinions about the police were also excluded.

The research was held in Merseyside, South Wales and Metropolitan (Bethnal Green & Teddington) Constabularies, in the week of September 26th 2011.

In summary:

Those representing the general public for this research were by and large positive about the police and policing. The kind of inappropriate relationships etc. that this research explored were not front-of-mind as a general concern. But the good character of officers is very important to overall opinion of police performance and the public feeling secure. Trust in the police is helped to be maintained if the public are able to feel that perks are not allowed to become the norm as this would fuel expectation and an unacceptable culture of favouritism and a lack of even-handedness.

"You don't expect to tip the police, it is just not needed." Male 40s London

There is a belief that transparency is protecting for all parties.

"It's when it's hidden that there's a hidden agenda." Female Merseyside

Context for findings:

There were a number of key factors driving how people commented on issues of inappropriate relationships etc.

Day to day policing

People's trust in the police acting with integrity is based on how they perceive the police to be doing the job of policing on a day-to-day basis, what's seen occurring in their own community and as reported in the media. There was also an opinion shared of excessive bureaucracy discouraging officers from acting in the best interests of the public. If a police officer is not seen to be doing their policing job well it reflects badly on his or her personal character, which suggests the officer is more liable to act corruptly. Wanting to be able to trust the police to act with integrity was critical to feeling that one would be personally treated with respect if caught up in any kind of an incident or even "stitched up." Also, that one's community will not be destabilised thus undermining one's own sense of security.

*"I think they do a good job and get more stick than they deserve sometimes
A lot of the small and essential things that they do go unnoticed by the public
But a lot of the time I do feel that the police get their priorities quite wrong."
Male Student London*

When incidences of inappropriate relationships become of issue they tend to undermine confidence in day-to-day policing. The police person who is motivated to seek personal gain through their police work is not the person who is felt can be trusted to be rigorous, objective and even-handed in their policing, because *“their head is not in the right place”* to be on the case. Self-interest allows for corrupt policing. A high standard of personal integrity is considered integral to maintaining a high quality of everyday policing.

“As a member of the public, if police accept bribes then they are in the same category as criminals and the mafia. As a big organizations with a lot of weight behind them and a lot of power/ influence.” Male 36 London

There is also an underlying respect for those people who take on the job of policing; a frequent comment made is, *“I wouldn’t do their job.”* People are aware of the average officer having to interact with the public under difficult, stressful circumstances and accept that there will be times when mistakes are made by individual officers.

“You get the odd one that is angry and agitated but other than that.”
Male 40s East London

Regional Differences

Those living within or neighbouring more deprived areas, or part of a minority ethnic group, typically expressed more concern about the potential for police integrity to breakdown. This was driven by greater exposure to the police presence in their community, awareness of the manner in which policing is routinely conducted and the negative consequences of poor policing practice.

Differences between the locations were typically ascribed to the local environment, which could lead to an opinion that policing was different. For example, residents within the Merseyside constabulary felt there could be a marked difference in policing depending on the area or constabulary you lived in. There was an opinion expressed that in Merseyside a more human touch prevailed compared to the Cheshire force who were considered less forgiving and out to get the motorist.

“My daughter used to live in Runcorn. Her husband used to drive a motor bike and come back every time saying, ‘those bastards were out there waiting for me again!’”

“We live in Cronton near Widnes, we moved there five years ago and my partner’s mixed race and he’s never been stopped so many times since we moved there, and its absolutely disgusting, its Cheshire police and its awful.”

In London there was a lot of comment about the riots earlier in the year, and some mentions from the ethnic minority sample about the Stephen Lawrence case. On the whole the London feedback (which was similar from West London and East London) was that policing in London was always going to be a challenge, that the early response to the riots was not ideal, but that after that the police had done a good job. There was little focus on the Metropolitan Police – in fact the police were generally discussed as a homogeneous group rather than as an alliance of local forces.

The ethnic minorities we interviewed were mainly in London – they were likely to be more attuned to the issue of potential racial discrimination, and felt they had to refer to it, but the usual response was,

“Things have got a lot better.”

“In London we tend to be more mixed, and generally organise these things better, there is more acceptance of different races and minorities.”

“I have had no problem with the police, as they have been very helpful to me every time I have needed them. I have nothing negative to say about them as whenever I have needed them they have been there. I am pretty pleased with the work that the police do.” Asian Male 50s London

On the whole the London participants presented a view that suggested they accepted their policing, were broadly satisfied with it, but did not think of it as being particularly *“London flavoured.”* In any case that is not what they wanted – if they expressed a desire it was for more local policing rather than any interest in a London-wide force.

‘A regular in the market’

‘Someone who knows the local kids’

The young men spoken to in South Wales, living outside of Cardiff’s city culture had not grown up to be especially connected or concerned about police in their local community. Now as young adults their main experience of policing came from being stopped in their cars when driving into the city at night, which was felt unnecessary but tempered with, *“what do you expect in an area like that?”*

Social/emotional needs of the office of police officer

The general public’s responses revealed a dynamic of two potentially opposing ideals. On the one hand people ideally want a police person to be considered doing a contemporary job just like anyone else in a democratic society of equals – the same rules apply to all of us. The police deserve no special status or favours, and we

expect them to treat us with respect. This does mean they are entitled to separate their personal life from their professional life, so once off-duty their lives are their solely their own affair.

“Ideally, you want officers to have a good relationship with the local community and want them to be very approachable people and even have conversation unrelated to the police with members of the community.”

Female Black 28 London

On the other hand people the general public seek comfort of a warm controlling embrace and reveal an emotionally driven desire for the police to conform to an idealised old-fashioned archetype of what they want the office of police person to represent in society; someone regarded of good character in all aspects of their life, motivated to care and protect others and on-duty 24/7, comforting to know they are watching over you. This version is someone we want to be able to look up to as a beacon of integrity.

Inappropriate relationships etc.

In general there is not considered to be an endemic culture of abuse of power or corruption within the police. The degree of unethical behaviour that people were aware of being reported in the media, local or national, is felt to be on a par with that found in many other walks of life; an inevitable characteristic of most organisations, part of human nature and the actions of a just few “bad apples.” The people spoken to in this research were overall positive to the way policing was conducted in the UK, regarding it as a difficult job often conducted under difficult circumstances.

“There’s corruption in everything and it seems worse when it’s the police, in that position. We look at the police as our protectors, when violence goes on. Churchill said, ‘We are able to sleep at night because the police are there to protect us.’” Female, 40s Merseyside

Within this general perception it was evident that opinions varied according to the personal expectations, as well as experiences, of different social groups, different age groups and the general reputation the specific local force had earned over time. Those people interviewed from minority ethnic communities were especially positive about police integrity, seeing the UK police as being of far greater integrity than those forces in their countries of ethnic origin, where bribes are reported as part of the culture, corrupting and detrimental to good policing.

“I have no problem with the police. I cannot speak for everyone but from my experience I feel that they are doing an alright job.” Male, Black 40 East London

In contrast the young men in South Wales had had very little dealings with the police over the years, had not noted much in the media about corruption and so had very little example on which to base an opinion. Their views therefore were quite often simply expression of ideals rather than opinion of actual behaviour.

Formal code of conduct

It is not always assumed that formal systems are in place to help maintain integrity, and it is imagined that it is down to the individual and local station to self-regulate.

Those who do expect there to be a code of conduct, just as there might in any large organisation with thousands of employees, typically assume that this would be a national policy and procedure.

“The system is open to too much interpretation if there is not a strict rule system in place.” Male London

“This bribery thing, you hear about it in other countries. I know the police in Nigeria are always given bribes for different things. If we don’t put a cap on it now we it will filter out like a parasite.” Female, Merseyside

Responsibility for good conduct

A consistent comment is that responsibility for avoiding inappropriate relationships lies also with the other party involved in the exchange, especially those in a position of power such as the media or large corporations. As described above, the public in part want their police officer to be “only human” and as such is vulnerable to temptation put their way by those with ulterior motive - *“I think the ones who offer discounts are encouraging it.”*

“Tesco’s is a big company, and whoever is at the top of Tesco if that’s what they are going to do (offer free lunches) it’s not for the police officers to not accept that.” Female 30s Merseyside

Responses to example scenarios

A number of examples were presented to help explore the issue of integrity and identify acceptable boundaries. These covered,

- Accepting gifts or entertainment from victims, offenders, businesses or local residents
- Second jobs (also for police support staff)
- Nepotism
- The relationship with the media

Also discussed were the issues of,

- Noble corruption
- Corruption

In these examples people found a distinction between actions/activities that were considered a consequence of getting the job of policing done effectively and personal reward. Everyone has a own sense of a boundary line which they feel signals there could be an issue if crossed

“When it becomes something worthwhile to the person receiving it.” Male, 20 S. Wales

There is a distinction made too about frequency. One-off gifts, incidental perks can be considered acceptable but if even low value perks were to become a frequent occurrence then people see problems emerging as a consequence of expectation and favouritism.

“One-off okay, regular would be a problem.”

Subsistence

In any contemporary job there will be occasions when the employee will be fed and entertained as they go about their business, so getting a free lunch at local community meeting about policing is considered a non-issue. If the Chief inspector is obliged to meet the press for lunch then again this need not be construed as a perk.

However, if a Chief Inspector is taken to a prestigious restaurant then it is felt by some that personal reward maybe starts to be a consideration.

“If I buy someone lunch I want something for them, that is where you get into issues of integrity!” Female London

“They could just meet in the boardroom.” Female, 40s Merseyside

Thank you's

It is also felt that a member of the public should be able to say thank you to a public servant who has brought them comfort. In the main it's felt that the victim of a crime should be allowed to satisfy their need to thank a caring officer with a modest box of chocolates. People are positive to the inference of an emotionally positive relationship between an officer and a member of the public.

"Just a small gesture (chocs) that will not be seen as a bribe by third parties and the media."

"This is similar to giving gifts to a doctor that has helped you through with wine, chocolates or flowers. Though, if this was taken to an extreme then this could be thought to be a bribe and the police will look like they are accepting bribes." Male Student London

But it can be pointed out that in some jobs a gift from a member of the public is considered unacceptable.

"You are not allowed to accept a gift if you work at Sainsbury's because it's seen as a bribe." Female Merseyside

"Don't really want to have the idea that the police are being pampered by everyone. At the end of the day they are there to do a job, the job is difficult but to be receiving all these free goods and things could look quite bad." Male 24 London

Some, often younger people who overall were less engaged with the topic, felt comfortable with the principal of an offender making such a gift but the specific circumstances would be critical – the case would have to be closed or out of the hands of the officer in question. However, most find such gifting to be questionable as it questioned the on-going relationship between the police and offenders.

"It could be like they are being paid off for turning a blind eye next time." Male London

Some people are comfortable with the box of chocolates becoming a more substantial thank you, but as the value grows the greater the expectation for gifts to be declared and ideally shared with other officers. For example, a £40 voucher left at the Station for a helpful officer is generally regarded as acceptable, made more so by a personal gift being declared to the force by the giving party.

“John Lewis voucher? I think that would be okay but you would need to understand the reasoning behind why the person was giving this gift.”

Male 40s London

Wine instead of chocolates invokes concern for some, not because of value but as the negative effects of alcohol are something the police have to cope with; perhaps churlish to not accept as a gift but best on the basis of putting it in the station’s charity raffle etc.

Once a gift becomes something akin to tickets to a significant sporting event there is a concern expressed that officers are receiving perks that amount to tips for doing their job and therefore risk becoming an expected part of their income. Just a couple of tickets to a local game could be thought okay but even then there is a recognition that there is a connection with the job of policing the crowd. Bias and favouritism because of self-interest start to come to mind; a slippery slope is seen forming and it’s felt best that such gifting should be blocked from the outset. However, the observation is made that in corporate culture the idea of rewards for good work is common. So, for example a project manager in the building industry took a minority view that perks such as tickets were fine and part of good working relationships. But generally it’s felt more acceptable if officers were incentivised by the force with such offers; grateful citizens or organisations might then be contributing to a local central pool.

“I feel that they should place a monetary value that if someone was to exceed they would be breaking the rules. Perhaps it should be okay for people to receive something of £20, max, as that wouldn’t cause too much of a scandal.” Male London

The idea of free entry into nightclubs highlights the dual character that people desire in a police officer. On the one hand it is felt reassuring to know that there are officers present (off duty but always there when really needed), on the other it could make them obliged to turn a blind eye to the behaviour of club owners and their doormen.

“Discounts in clubs would be a problem for me as there are a lot of problems in clubs and I’m sure there is a lot of unsolved cases involving people getting hurt by bouncers and things like that. Not too bad but not acceptable either.”

Male 24 London

Perks from their beat

There are mixed feeling about police offers being openly offered perks within the community. A specific example that came up in Merseyside was free meals from retailers such as Tesco and McDonald’s. (This example was then also prompted in

South Wales which prompted comment that the local police were known to collect unsold McDonald's food at the end of the night.)

Retailers could be criticised for creating a routine culture of preferential treatment, for their outlets and police officers.

"But let's say you were in a crash and the police couldn't respond because they were all in a Tesco. Because they have given Tesco the priority because Tesco feeds them."

Others emphasise such positive acts of embracing the police into the community.

*"Yeah, but it works. By them (the police) going in it shows they are around."
"They (McDonalds) just like their presence, like the van outside."*

However, if it were retailers offering financial discounts to their local officers then the general feeling was an acceptable line for 'thank you's' had been crossed and that it starts to look like "protection money." Such a scenario prompts people to express their cynicism about human nature.

"I am a firm believer that nothing is for nothing in this world." Male 36 London

"Not entirely happy with this idea, are we giving this discount to teachers? A discount just because of the job that they choose to do is not okay, especially if people that equally deserve the discount are not receiving it." Male London

"If the retailer is just giving it to police it is wrong, not a bribe just not right. They might genuinely be grateful for what police do but are they hiding anything? It is not transparent - could look a bit bad." Male 24 London

Second Jobs

Because people hold one perspective on policing as just another job, the idea of a second job is intuitively not a problem for most people; taking a second job is thought a common necessity these days and police wages are not thought to be substantial.

When specific occupations are considered most eventually spot potential areas of conflict. The older the person the more likely they are to find possible conflict

The taxi driver could be witness to drunken abusive behaviour or overhears criminal conversations; a compromising dilemma for an officer. Also, there is a risk of the archetypal good character required of a policeman being challenged, e.g. the cage fighter who exposes his taste for violence (whereas the self-defence trainer is sharing his skills with the community).

Pole dancing or training were examples prompted; only those who considered this activity to be sport felt comfortable – most saw it as an activity of a sexual nature and associated with vice, which conflicted with any desire for the police offer to be of good character.

“You’d think she’d be a bit more professional but at the end of the day it’s legal.” Male S. Wales

The idea of being a private investigator was generally thought problematic because of access to police records.

“They should not be able to go into people’s personal details, it’s kind of like human nature if you got an advantage you’re gonna use it.”

Support Staff

Support staff are expected to be abide by the kind of conduct asked of any employee, but in view of the confidential nature of much of the information that may pass through their hands, they are expected to consider carefully what gifts they should receive. However, many wondered what opportunities would realistically exist for them to receive gifts of small scale that could undermine policing. If they were being bribed with substantial gifts that would benefit their personal lifestyle then this would be a criminal act subject to the laws that apply to anyone in a position of such responsibility.

Relationships with the media

Overall discussion of the media in this context revealed a low regard for their integrity. They were consistently bracketed with politicians as self-serving and lacking integrity.

The self-interest of the media says any rank of officer is unwise to trust in a confidential relationship and to imagine they can control the media who have their own agenda to satisfy with regard to attracting, informing and thrilling an audience.

The general view is that any dialogue should be open to scrutiny by others inside and outside the force. This would protect the reputation of those officers who necessarily need to liaise with the media.

However, it is recognised that the media can play an important part in monitoring police activities; but this does not require private lunches and transparency should be encouraged.

"I have an issue with that, companies like Sky and other media are very good at buying their way and I feel that no journalist should be building a partnership with a police officer." Female 28 London

"The police need to sustain a good relationship with the media and then journalists can speak of how they were earlier speaking with the police."
Male 36 London

It is worth noting how this topic and negatives feelings about the media could invoke in people a more negative stance towards the police. Participants who had spoken positively about the police could start to express far more negative feelings, for example when the News of the World issue was mentioned a largely positive point of view was turned sour,

"This was not good for the police; as they already have an incredible reputation for corruption and not being transparent with the public. This is a stereotype that is very difficult to shift as many of the public have this perception." Female Black London

Noble Corruption

The discussion touched on the issue of "bending the rules when necessary"; it's accepted that there are times when it will prove necessary to achieve a noble aim, but this feels more acceptable to the public if they overall feel confident the police officers will have the integrity to know when enough is enough. There is good drama in TV cops bending the rules every episode but generally people don't hanker after the kind of police culture seen in *Life on Mars*.

Nepotism

Discussion about nepotism was succinct in that it is felt to be a fast track, running both ways, to future obligation and corruption. People felt there was nothing more to say.

Chief Constables

As with Police Officers in the ranks, Chief Constables and their senior officers are expected to necessarily receive free lunches or attend social functions in the course of doing their duty. Even if they are off-duty it's expected they will have been they have been invited because of their rank. As long as such occasions are noted and on the record then in principal there is not an ethical issue raised that triggers concerns about integrity. The issue is what is potentially said and done as a consequence and therefore judgement has to be made about how others might view a specific event. Again, to be paid for by a partisan lobby is in principal possible, but

the context is crucial. It's felt an officer of good character would know instinctively what kinds of occasions would be judged in the public interest.

Small gifts for Chief Constables were generally thought ill advised, and it was expected that they would be handed on to the Force, perhaps for charitable raffle.

The Chief Constable is expected to set the standard for his force and if any substantial gifts or hospitality can be construed to be a personal lifestyle benefit it then feels to be inappropriate. Even if provided by a friend of the senior officer, in the public's mind that friend is then in a position to call in a favour. The officer's integrity is undermined.

"Morally, I think its okay (box at football game) but the concern needs to be the public perception. If this guy is getting hospitality then what other perks is he getting? Stuff like this puts the police in the public eye and the police can't afford to have a knock to their integrity. They have to be crystal clean with the public. I think that if you start accepting holidays - not just the police, politicians too - it will not go down well with the public." Male 36 London

An explicit political parallel life for an officer is thought inappropriate as they are they to enforce the law not define it.

"At a very senior level I would discourage all of these (political roles). I wouldn't encourage it whilst they are still in the job as they don't want to be given too many positions of power." Male 36 London