Community policing and recovery: a case study following a mass shooting in the UK

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Abstract

This article draws upon research conducted as part of an officially sponsored evaluation into one part of a recovery programme, put in place following a mass shooting event in the Plymouth city district of Keyham, in the UK, in the summer of 2021. It discusses the contribution made by a dedicated community policing team, focusing on its reception by the local community and aspects of its constitution and operational practices that may be regarded as critical success factors. More critically, the article questions whether this part of the recovery programme was as much about the recovery of the reputation and standing of the local police as it was about the recovery of a putative vulnerable community.

Keywords Community policing · Recovery · Mass shooting

Introduction

In this article, we draw upon a narrative summary of data gathered as part of an officially commissioned evaluation of part of the formal response to a mass shooting event in England (a fuller exposition may be found in the official report: see Watson, McBride, James & Gilling (2023)). In particular, we examine the contribution made by a dedicated community policing team to a multi-agency recovery programme. The article briefly describes and situates the recovery programme and the 'back story' that provided its immediate context, before going on to discuss the contribution of the team, situating this within a consideration of its constitution, and the wider organisational climate in which it was located. We then draw upon a narrative summary of our research to consider the public's positive perception of the team after its first year of operation. This is followed by a discussion that identifies the introduction of the team as a success, and as a potential good practice model for adoption in similar circumstances elsewhere, subject to a number of caveats. The

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discussion also takes a critical step back to question whether, despite the apparent success, deeper consideration needs to be given to the meaning and realisation of recovery in such situations as that pertaining here.

The mass shooting and the recovery programme

In August 2021, at the height of the summer in the English city of Plymouth, a 'lone shooter', Jake Davison, shot and killed five people and injured two others, before fatally shooting himself. While mass shooting is a familiar component of, for example, the US landscape (Gabor 2021), such events are rare in the UK. The clearly newsworthy incident attracted widespread local, national and international media attention. Concentrated within a small geographical area that fell mainly but not exclusively within the Plymouth city district of Keyham, the shooting was the subject of a rapid emergency services response and major crime investigation led by Devon and Cornwall Constabulary, with armed officers arriving on the scene within minutes, in part due to an enhanced level of preparedness in Plymouth by virtue of its close association with the armed services. There was also a community response, extending from the highly localised actions of small community groups and local political representatives through to the more formalised actions of a network of public agencies, much of which was eventually supported and supplemented by a package of central government funding that was formally announced in November 2021, having been negotiated over the intervening months, to enable local agencies to deliver what became known as The Keyham Recovery Programme.

As its name suggests, this Programme cohered around the notion of recovery, with its implication that the mass shooting incident had damaged the fabric of Keyham and its environs in such a way that required something beyond the norm of routine, everyday public service provision, community governance and 'business as usual' to put right. This sense of damage was sharpened by the perception that Keyham was not 'the kind of place' where such things happened: despite being a relatively deprived inner urban district bordering the city's dockyard, Keyham has historically been a relatively low-crime area within Plymouth, and not 'on the police radar' to the same extent as other much more notorious neighbouring districts were.

The implication also registered in other ways. For example, it fitted the emergency management discourse which has become prevalent since the early 2000s and within which public services are expected to think about, plan, organise and deliver their collective responses to 'critical incidents' such as that which impacted Keyham, within a framework that includes distinct 'phases' of response and recovery (Dillon 2014). It also made sense within the context of a tendency towards isomorphism, a form of localised policy transfer (Dolowitz and Marsh 2000) whereby responses to critical incidents and subsequent recovery 'phases' are shaped by others' previously documented experiences of similar such incidents elsewhere across the globe, understood in terms of the sharing of good or best practice (about recovery). It also makes sense on a more foundational empathetic human level given the undoubted horror incurred by a mass shooting event. However, this point notwithstanding, it is worth noting that the priority afforded

to recovery and its implicit assumption of vulnerability in governance narratives is something of more recent origin, and something that was not necessarily so discernible in association with earlier disasters or equivalent critical incidents (Furedi 2007), thereby hinting at the relevance of wider social and cultural contextual changes that have been well documented by various social commentators, including, for example, the risk society thesis, and the therapeutic turn (Beck 1992; Furedi 2004).

The Keyham Recovery Programme took shape in the form of two separate but related strands, these being A Safer Keyham, and A Healthy and Resilient Keyham. A Safer Keyham mainly consisted of the establishment of a community policing team, with additional support for youth engagement; crime prevention outreach work that promoted and offered enhanced domestic and personal security devices for local residents; public space environmental improvements that included mobile CCTV provision and enhanced street lighting; a range of counselling and support services for victims and witnesses; and the provision of a small grant funding pot for community groups. A Healthy and Resilient Keyham included funding for community development work; the provision of dedicated social work support in local schools; and provision for memorialisation and remembrance. The two strands were logically separated by the different funding streams that supported them, and they had parallel (but overlapping) multi-agency governance structures, connected at the highest level by a senior leadership-led Strategic Coordinating Group, and at the ground level by holistic, joined-up delivery.

While being relatively comprehensive, the Recovery Programme was time-limited, with much of the central government funding having to be spent or allocated by the end of March 2022, although the community policing and victim support funding remained in place for a year longer, in part because of a case being made for the continued need for it up to and during the much-delayed coronial inquest in the early part of 2023. Within the Safer Keyham strand, funding had been made available for an independent evaluation to assess the impact of interventions, and also to learn lessons, contributing to an evidence base upon which the isomorphic tendencies noted above feed. The authors conducted the independent evaluation, having submitted a successful bid and obtained ethical clearance through their parent academic institution. The research started in the spring of 2022, around the time much of the central government time-limited funding was coming to an end, and consisted in the main of documentary analysis, interviews with key practitioners and community representatives, and a community survey. The survey was completed by 240 residents of Keyham and immediately bordering neighbourhoods, based on a multi-stage cluster sampling technique (Stoneman & Gilbert 2016). We also used purposive sampling to engage professionals and community members in individual and focus group interviews, completing a total of 23 interviews with professional and 16 with community members.

The main focus of this article is upon the role of the community policing team. As with the rest of the Recovery Programme, the team's goal was to contribute to recovery, which was something that had to be given meaning to and translated into operational policing theory and practice, given that recovery is not conventionally an underpinning rationale of community policing. Before we consider this, however, it

is important to recognise that this took place within a particular context that served to structure the translation process in particular ways.

The context and back story

Firstly and most obviously, as already noted, the Keyham shootings could be understood through an emergency/disaster/critical incident management orthodoxy that has developed apace in the UK over the last two decades or so, in the wake of the 2004 Civil Contingencies Act and other key events, and which provides a cognitive and normative framework within which to understand what happened, and what should happen next, where response gives way to recovery.

Secondly, there was a particular local context that may have given a particular inflexion to the meaning of recovery to the police in this particular instance. One aspect of this concerned the response itself, which inevitably left its own mark. This included the immediate emergency response, complete with the 'out of place' presence of armed police officers and several helicopters; the deployment of security cordons around crime scenes, staffed in part by numbers of similarly 'out of place' unfamiliar police officers from neighbouring forces provided through mutual aid arrangements; instructions to stay indoors for some considerable time while crime scenes were searched and secured; and door-to-door enquiries in the days following the shootings. All of this—not helped by the presence and sometimes predictably problematic actions of the tabloid news media in large numbers—impacted local residents in a way that had the potential to compound the original shock of the incident, effectively equivalent to secondary victimisation at the community level, and it is notable that the community policing team saw and projected itself to the community as being physically and symbolically removed from the police initial response and investigation: they were there for recovery, not response; represented as 'our police' rather than 'those police', even if the line between the two was inevitably blurred at times.

A second aspect of the local context concerned the 'back story' to the shootings, which was exposed by the news media in the days that followed, and which served to frame how recovery might be interpreted in this particular instance. One part of the back story was the possibility that the perpetrator's actions might be considered as a terrorist incident, given his online engagement and association with an 'incel' phenomenon that had been linked to violent incidents in other countries (see, for example, Weaver & Morris 2021). The attribution of an incident as a terrorist incident takes it down a particular response pathway, but despite the discussion in the media the Chief Constable of Devon & Cornwall Police acted quickly to close down this possibility by imposing a definition of the situation as a domestic incident that had spilled out into public space—the first murder victim was the perpetrator's mother, brutally shot in the family home. In doing this, the Chief Constable demonstrated compliance with best practice guidance about the rapid deployment of authoritative communications in critical incident situations (College of Policing, undated), to fill a void that can otherwise be quickly filled by other media, including social media, as evidenced in the immediate aftermath of the 7/7 terrorist bombings in London,

when the police lost control of the mediated narrative. In this instance, then, the Chief Constable's actions demonstrated a (successful) attempt to control the narrative—although it is noteworthy that despite the Chief Constable's definition of the situation, the Keyham shootings were never alighted upon by the media or other interest groups as an exemplar of the depressingly wide extent of domestic violence homicides, as this theme was eclipsed by other issues of community vulnerability and recovery.

A more concerning aspect of the back story revolved around the question of the effectiveness of police firearms licensing, given that this clearly troubled perpetrator was legally in possession of the gun he used in his shooting spree (Morris 2023). In turn this invited parallels to be drawn with earlier mass shootings in the UK (North 2013), and earlier associated political discourse around the appropriate regulation and control of gun ownership. To some extent the process operated to hold this issue in abeyance at the outset of the Recovery Programme as Devon and Cornwall Police had quickly referred themselves over this issue for scrutiny by the Independent Office for Police Conduct, whose investigation and later report was, like the later Coroner's Inquest and report, highly critical of the police's failings in the area of firearms licensing (Independent Office for Police Conduct 2022).

A third aspect to the back story picked up by the media concerned previous contact between the police and perpetrator beyond the issue of firearms licensing, although clearly pertinent to it. It became apparent that the perpetrator was known to the police because of previous violent offending behaviour, which had been dealt with through a deferred prosecution intervention in place of a more formal caution or criminal prosecution. The violence, caught on CCTV video and later played at the Coroner's Inquest, raised questions about the appropriateness of such a low-level intervention, and the links between police engagement with the perpetrator over this and regarding their decision-making about his possession of a licensed firearm (Independent Office for Police Conduct 2022).

The net effect, particularly of the latter two aspects of the back story, served to cast a critical spotlight on the legitimacy of the local police constabulary. Although the circumstances may be unique, the attachment of a 'legitimacy problem' to the situation is not uncommon, and it might be recalled that police orthodoxy on critical incident management owes its origins to lessons learned from the Metropolitan Police's inadequate handling of the murder of the black teenager Stephen Lawrence, whilst it might also be suggested that the context for the introduction of neighbourhood policing in the early 2000s included a 'reassurance gap' that at least problematised police legitimacy to some extent (Millie & Herrington 2005). In sum, then, the back story to the Keyham shootings contributed to the tainting of the image of the police, thereby providing some motivation for the kind of 'legitimation work' that Thumala et al. (2011) describe well in the case of a similarly tainted private security industry in the first decade of the twenty-first century.

How, then, did the community policing team set about making their contribution to recovery? Whilst this ultimately boiled down to what the team did in terms of their operational deployment, our view is that an understanding of this is best contextualised and discussed within a consideration both of how the team itself was constituted, and the organisational climate in which it operated, since these provide

the key points of lesson learning, all together comprising the necessary and sufficient conditions of success that might otherwise be overlooked in any narrow focus on operational tactics alone.

The constitution of the community policing team

We start by considering the constitution of the team, which was a facilitator of many of the team's attributes and successes. A key part of its constitution lay in the exceptional resourcing of the community policing team. Whilst Keyham had previously had a neighbourhood policing presence, it was a presence of only one constable and one police community support officer, with a geographical responsibility that took them beyond the confines of the Keyham neighbourhood. That was very much austerity-infused neighbourhood policing (O'Neill 2014), which contrasted starkly with a dedicated team of six constables and their sergeant, protected from the abstractions to other duties that so frequently undermines area-based policing (Higgins 2017), and, as noted above, separated from the post-incident major crime investigative work conducted elsewhere within the force. Being much larger than other neighbourhood policing teams covering similar areas, the size of the Keyham team carried certain consequences. Firstly, it symbolically communicated the importance of the team both to the officers staffing it, and to others recognising Keyham as a special case, even if there was some envy directed at the team for this reason. Secondly, and more instrumentally, it enabled the team to operate a shift system that ensured a more or less permanent police presence in the area during daytime hours, thereby facilitating the capacity for the kind of area beat management that has remained more of a pipe dream than an actuality in community policing elsewhere in the UK. More specifically, this capacity for a sustainable presence in the locality made possible the successful operation of an information management tracker, set up and overseen by the team sergeant.

The tracker was populated by the team and was the repository of information on community engagement activities and actions undertaken by them, as well as community intelligence. At the beginning of each shift constables would consult the tracker, alongside the force's general intelligence system, to inform their operational activities and priorities, and the tracker would be completed before the end of each shift to inform the next pair's actions. In this way, the tracker served to make a reality of the integration of intelligence-led and neighbourhood policing that academic research has long-advocated (Bullock 2013).

Another key feature of the constitution of the team was its recruitment. Over the years, community policing has attracted a reputation for being an area of deployment where well-seasoned officers are effectively put out to grass before retirement, or where relatively junior, novice officers are anxious to complete their 'sentences' before earning their release into more glamorous specialisms. This was not the case with Keyham, and the inspector given responsibility to establish the team was also given free rein to hand pick them. In so doing he drew upon local knowledge of neighbourhood police officers who had already distinguished themselves in that role, including some former police community support officers who had subsequently

become sworn officers. A qualification for joining the team was therefore a demonstrable capacity and commitment to community policing, which perhaps was underscored for the team members by an awareness of the symbolic importance of the team to the local constabulary.

The organisational climate

As Fenn and Bullock (2022) have observed, the effectiveness of community policing is about more than just the constitution of the team itself and depends also upon a supportive and conducive organisational climate. The sense of importance attached to this particular mission may have been a part of this climate, but there were also more tangible aspects to facilitate the work of the team. Fenn and Bullock (ibid.) note that some neighbourhood policing teams that they observed reported a sense of being unnoticed within an organisation whose performance culture has come to prioritise 'hard' indicators such as recorded crime rates, clear up rates and other quantitative indicators. Whilst it would be inaccurate to suggest that the team was entirely untouched by this conventional 'performance pressure', the team was nevertheless given a very strong steer towards a different kind of policing that fitted in with the vision of recovery held by the team's architects.

The blueprint for the team, handed to them in guidance from their inspector, was very much the blueprint for the New Labour model of neighbourhood policing that had originally been intended for national roll out back in 2008 (Innes, Roberts, Lowe & Innes 2020). This, it will be remembered, followed the trialling of reassurance policing, which in turn was based upon the conception of signal crimes which for many served as an explanation for the 'reassurance gap' discovered in the difference between declining recorded crime rates and public perceptions or rising crime and disorder in their areas, accompanied by declining confidence in the police. In the case of Keyham, the shootings could be represented as the signal crimes, and recovery could be interpreted as the closing of the reassurance gap, making reassurance the route to recovery, and simultaneously an aspect of legitimation work.

Consequently, far from being unnoticed, the community policing team were very much under the spotlight, and subjected to high expectations from line managers who expected to see the realisation of what was labelled as the connectivity plan. This required the team to demonstrate their efforts to engage with community members, community groups and local agencies working in the area through such devices as community consultation events, 'cuppa-with-a-copper' sessions at community centres, regular visits to local schools, and high visibility patrolling more generally. Where the engagement could not be done in person, it was done virtually through social media. In this way, the activities of the team fitted very closely to the 'visibility, accessibility and familiarity' formula articulated with neighbourhood policing, although in keeping with the College of Policing's (2018) evidence-based Neighbourhood Policing Guidelines, there was an underpinning instrumentality to this insofar as such activity fed into the team's 'community mapping' exercise.

The team's inspector also issued a set of 'behavioural expectations' for the team which, amongst other things, foregrounded the importance of incorporating

procedural justice principles into police-public encounters, likely in recognition that such principles enhance both perceptions of police legitimacy and public compliance with the law (Hough, Jackson & Bradford 2017). In our interviews with police officers the word 'support' was used frequently as a shorthand for these principles: support meant a lot of respectful listening to what residents had to say, and where relevant advising or making referrals to welfare-oriented services such as victim support counsellors or social services to demonstrate the bona fides of the team—they were there to help, not to police in the more conventional law enforcement sense of the term.

That said, the two were not necessarily always mutually exclusive, and partly reflecting the continued presence of at least some performance pressure, if coming as much from their own cultural dispositions as from above, the officers were keen to cite examples of successful law enforcement, particularly in the case of drug dealing, where they felt their gradual acceptance by some of the community was evidenced by the latter passing on concerns about suspected dealers that the team was eventually able to act upon. This was help or support *through* policing, in a locality that was remarkable for a relatively low level of recorded crime, which may have limited the performance pressure to which the team might have been subjected to in another area with higher levels of recorded crime.

Public perceptions of the police

Our community survey and interviews with residents provided us with an opportunity to ascertain how well the community policing team had landed with the Keyham community. Here, we provide a summary overview of some of the research—a more detailed exposition is set out elsewhere (Watson et al. 2023). 70% of respondents to our survey from Keyham said they were aware of the presence of the dedicated team, whilst 45% of respondents had had some sort of contact with them, the majority of these being engagement with the officers on patrol, with somewhat fewer encountering the police in community meeting, or other neighbourhood drop-in centres. 80% of Keyham residents said they thought the presence of the team was valuable to the area's recovery, with only 8% thinking it was not—these were most likely to be middle-aged males. Our interviews generally evidenced a positive reception of the team, with positive words such as reassurance, safety and security often being associated with the team's presence, although a small number suggested that the enhanced police presence conveyed the impression of there being a greater risk of crime, which might contribute to a greater level of fear—something that has been observed in other research in this field of practice (Hinkle & Weisburd 2008).

When asked about the impact of community policing on the community, 60% of Keyham residents described it as positive, with only 1% suggesting it was negative. Amongst those aware of the presence of the dedicated team, the assessment of a positive impact was higher, at 70%, whilst none cited a negative impact. Perceptions of a positive impact were higher still for those having any sort of contact with the team, and highest amongst those whose contact had been in the most participative

or two-way formats, notably public meetings and neighbourhood watch meetings, which both approached a 90% positive assessment of impact.

Turning our attention to general perceptions of the police around questions of trust and confidence, we replicated questions from the Crime Survey of England and Wales (CSEW), to facilitate comparison between Keyham and the national picture, at a similar point in time towards the back end of 2022. The results showed a broadly similar profile: for example, those agreeing that they had confidence in the police in their area scored at 69% in the CSEW, and 65% in Keyham. Interestingly, Keyham outscores that national CSEW on those statements that perhaps most closely correlate with the putative virtues of community policing, namely 'understanding the issues that affect this community', and 'dealing with the things that matter to the people in this community'. ON more general indicators, such as respectful or fair treatment, or being relied upon to be there when needed, the results between the national picture and Keyham were either similar, or worse for the latter, by up to 10%. On the face of it this may be surprising given the enhanced service provided to the residents of Keyham, but it is important to note that Keyham is classed as a mix of 'hard-pressed' and 'constrained city dweller' output areas, which generally fare less well on trust and confidence indicators than the national picture suggests. Moreover, whilst it might be expected that the additional resources and working ethos of the dedicated community policing team might enhance trust and confidence in the police, it is important to bear in mind the potentially dampening effects of the aftermath of the shootings and associated major crime investigation, and the Keyham context mentioned at the beginning of this article, not to mention a national context in which a succession of scandals about police officer conduct have left their mark.

We know from the work of the Police Foundation (2022) that between 2008 and 2020 there was a correlation at the national level between numbers of officers deployed to neighbourhood policing roles and CSEW measurements of public confidence, so it is likely that this also occurred in Keyham, albeit with the dampening effects just mentioned. Indeed, when we cross-tabulated responses to trust and confidence questions with experiences of contact with the police, the results show very starkly that confidence is significantly higher, sometimes more than twice as much, amongst those who have had any form of contact with the community policing team, when compared to those with no such contact. It is also relevant to note that whether or not residents had contact with the team, 32% of those from Keyham said that their confidence in the police had improved over the previous 12 months, whilst only 6% said that it had got worse. A majority of 62% reported that confidence levels had remained much the same.

Discussion

Based upon a narrative summary of data collected as part of a commissioned evaluation, this article has described the establishment and operation of a community policing team to effect recovery following a mass shooting in the Plymouth district of Keyham, in England. It has suggested that the wheels of community policing were well oiled by the constitution of a hand-picked team of committed officers, and

the presence of an organisational climate characterised by high levels of managerial support and direction, with a clarity of vision and purpose underpinned by institutional recognition of the importance of recovery-oriented community policing in this case. Our research suggests that this team was well received by the majority of residents, and particularly by those who had had contact with officers from the team. Whilst the team was not disinterested in crime, crime was not its main priority, with recovery being interpreted in operational policing terms as the provision of reassurance which has been the stock-in-trade of neighbourhood policing in the UK. Based on the data, then, our conclusion about the first year of operation of the community policing team is a positive one: the presence of the team was felt and appreciated, and its impact was noticed. The team did a good job.

There are some caveats before we might propose that community policing provides a sound model for policing following critical incidents such as this mass shooting. Firstly, as noted here, if community policing is a necessary condition, it must also be made sufficient through the right constitution of the policing team, and the right organisational climate. Secondly, we are mindful that this is a single case study, with some unique features. Recovery-oriented community policing will not necessarily work everywhere and may have worked especially well in Keyham because of some of its features: it is a relatively low-crime and ethnically homogeneous area, and its close proximity to and historical links with the nearby naval dockyard may lend it a cultural habitus that is generally well disposed towards the uniformed services, including the police.

There is also an issue that we have not yet addressed, and that lay beyond our data collection. This concerns the notion of recovery itself. This was a notion that was not really questioned by those involved in the Recovery Programme: rather, recovery was accepted as a needed next step for Keyham following the major incident, and a self-evident and unquestioned good. Yet this unquestioned status of recovery also renders it a rather elastic term, in the same way that crime prevention might be. For the police, recovery was largely interpreted through the lens of reassurance, and it must be remembered that the community policing team was only a part of the overall Recovery Programme, and that recovery might have meant different things to the different actors involved.

Recovery as reassurance, with its links to trust and confidence, might be regarded as a form of emotional governance—legitimate in its own right, apparently justified in this case by an assumed vulnerability of the local community following a mass shooting, but by no means the only way in which recovery might be imagined or governed. Given what we know about the context in which the shootings occurred, where the fundamental competence of the police in firearms licensing, law enforcement and the use of out-of-court disposals was called into question in a highly visible and mediated way, there is a danger that the police's contribution to the Recovery Programme was as much about recovering the reputation of the police as it was about the recovery of Keyham itself. Picking up on a thread laid earlier in the article, this could be seen as a particularly acute case of legitimation work. The time-limited nature of governmental funding for the dedicated team, tied to administrative accounting periods rather than any measure of community recovery, does not mitigate this danger, but rather chimes with Easthope's (2018) observations

about a 'recovery myth' in disaster management. This is a much wider point that travels beyond an assessment only of the police contribution to Keyham after the mass shootings event, but it is nevertheless a challenging one that raises important questions about whether sufficient thought has been given to understanding how post-critical incident events such as mass shootings should be most appropriately responded to and governed.

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