

View from the chair

Police officers should be accountable for their actions but where is the positive media coverage when they get it right? Paul McKeever writes



Paul McKeever, chairman of the Police Federation

The local bobby, once a well regarded pillar of the community has recently become an undeserving punch bag for the 24/7 media agenda with officers often portrayed as the villain. But why have relations between the police and the community broken down and what is needed for bridges to be rebuilt?

As a serving officer for over 30 years, I have witnessed a steady erosion of public confidence in the police resulting from a number of issues; a relentless news agenda which has failed to give a sense of balance, the police service bearing the brunt for failings across the whole criminal justice system and ineffective communication with the public on policy, tactics and public order decisions.

You just have to look at the recent media furore over the G20 protests, the Taser incident in Nottingham and the endless alleged 'corrupt officer' exposés in the local and national press to see the police service is under intense scrutiny and attack. Not only can this be a bitter pill to swallow for the thousands of hardworking police officers up and down the country but is made more frustrating by the lack of balance given to the good work they do.

I accept that in a 24/7 news society press pages need to be filled and news programmes need fresh angles. I also accept that the police must be accountable for their actions. But

what I struggle with is the lack of balance given by the media and the ill-perceived judgement that the public only want to hear bad news. I recently attended the 2009 Police Bravery Awards and was surrounded by a room full of heroes; people 'just doing their job'. Surely responsible journalism is reporting the good news as well as the bad?

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The lack of balance being reported is also a failing of senior management to support and effectively communicate why officers have taken a course of action or deployed a certain method. The introduction of measures such as the Single Public Confidence Target where some excellent work has been done across the country is almost pointless if when the police are being knocked chief officers sit on their hands. This does little for public confidence but also little for officers' confidence that they will not be treated as a criminal when they volunteer for high stress roles.

Communication also needs to improve with the public to understand what it is that they want from policing. If we are not providing the policing that the public wants then this needs to be urgently addressed.

But it is the blame the police get for the failings across the criminal justice system that marks the biggest reason public confidence is affected. The police are commonly blamed for the 70 per cent reoffending rate, criminals being given ineffective sentences, the criminalisation of middle England and the scourge of government targets and red tape.

As we police by consent, confidence in the service is essential. To rebuild confidence in the police a wholesale review of the criminal justice system is needed and a firm commitment given that underpinning this will be effective engagement with the public to see what they want from policing in the 21st century. Without this we will start to see a drop in officers prepared to volunteer for high risk roles and possibly a decline in people wanting to join the service.