

# Building bridges

When the presence of a police uniform can provoke fear and anxiety, how do police officers build trust with minority communities? Ch Supt Brian Langston writes

The small commuter town of High Wycombe in Buckinghamshire, covered by Thames Valley Police, was just one of the areas where anti-terror raids took place following the foiled terrorist strike to blow up nine aeroplanes. Although the bobby on the beat is a powerful image which may well invoke warm and sentimental feelings amongst much of the public, there are sections of our law-abiding community for whom an approaching uniform creates overwhelming fear and anxiety.

Such is the impact of adverse public opinion following a succession of indefensible failures. The Scarman report highlighted a loss of confidence in the police and policing methods following riots across the country. The Macpherson inquiry criticised the police handling of the murder of black teenager Stephen Lawrence and the BBC documentary, *The Secret Policeman*, revealed officers with unacceptable attitudes. Many black and asian sections of the community genuinely believe that the service is riddled with racism.

With this stereotype planted in their minds, regularly reinforced through negative experiences of family and friends, community anecdotes and further high profile cases such as Forest Gate, it should come as no surprise to encounter apprehension, scepticism or even hostility from some of our minority communities.

The only way to overturn this huge adverse expectation is to ensure that every personal encounter with the police is positive and professional. This involves stepping out from behind the uniform and showing the human and compassionate face of policing.

## Terrorism

Nevermore so is this required than during times of heightened tension such as the current security operation which so far has seen over two dozen suspects arrested and over 50 premises searched right across the country.

The public profile of the terrorist has changed dramatically over recent years from the foreign fanatic operating from a secret base in the Middle East, to the young lad next door who kept himself to himself and attended the school down the road. To this extent, terror

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has become ‘localised’ and the impact of counter-terrorism operations has become far more immediate and impactful upon local communities, because the suspects and their families are personally known to them. The sense of ‘disbelief’ which frequently follows an arrest is one which is readily understandable and demands greater reassurance from the authorities.

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Racists frequently exploit periods of raised tension and therefore there needs to be a heightened state of alert for hate crime and far right activity with prompt action against racial harassment and strong visible support and reassurance for victims. At times like this the community needs to be reassured that they are being protected by the police, not targeted by them.

As a service, the police radar is not always in tune with the priorities of the community. During a spate of violent robberies against Asian cab drivers in Berkshire, a well-intentioned but totally mistimed enforcement operation against taxis, involving headquarters departments and the local authority bypassed all BCU tasking and community impact processes and resulted in 250 angry predominantly Pakistani cab drivers besieging the police station, souring relations which had taken many months to develop.

Operations such as these and those targeting illegal immigrants and any exercise of stop and search powers need to be handled with the greatest sensitivity if further erosion of trust is to be avoided.

## Community partnerships

The key to partnership lies in building relationships during the good times and not waiting for the critical incident to happen before engaging the community. Independent Advisory Groups, which include representatives from black minority ethnic communities, take many years to build up a relationship of mutual trust but pay dividends in helping to defuse tension during times of crisis.

In Thames Valley, community representatives including the Independent Advisory Group and police authority members have patrolled with police officers during times of heightened tension to gauge community impact and assess policing style. Unless this is carried out in a ‘community’ style, the tactic of high profile policing can serve to raise tensions rather than reduce them. It is essential that communities are engaged and not simply patrolled. Post 9/11 Thames Valley Police pioneered the first operational use of their Black Police Association through Operation Comfort, utilising the language skills and enhanced cultural awareness of their black and asian officers in reassurance operations around schools, temples and town centres. This tactic proved highly popular with both the community and the police officers involved and has now become part of the standard operating procedures following a counter-terrorism operation.

The appointment of a local authority official to act as ‘Bronze’ partnership during enforcement operations has been identified as good practice to ensure that all the authorities are joined up in maintaining community cohesion. Joint meetings involving police, council officials and community representatives held at regular intervals during heightened tension ensures communication of key messages and the identification of any emerging concerns from the community.

## Family liaison

The treatment of the immediate family of the suspects or those displaced during house searches has a profound effect on community confidence. The early appointment of a family liaison officer helps to identify the practical needs of the family and avoid long-term damage to the fragile relationship of trust. In one protracted search an entire extended family, including several women and children, were displaced for several days whilst a forensic search was conducted during which family liaison officers, as well as providing investigative updates, ensured the family were provided with everything from baby wipes to nightwear.

Whilst intrusive property searches will be unavoidable, the manner in which they are carried out will have a bearing on future relationships. Seizure of computer equipment has been a regular feature of recent operations. The impact on small businesses of losing this equipment, often for several months, can have a



the world to operate largely unarmed and enjoys level of public support that is the envy of most. Neighbourhood policing provides us with the best opportunity for a generation to maintain our tradition of policing by consent. It is tested in every interaction we have with the community and we need to ensure we do not lose the mandate - the alternative is too awful to contemplate.

Chief Superintendent Brian Langston is the BCU Commander for Berkshire east. He is the president of the Thames Valley Police Black Police Association and holds the ethnic minority reserve seat on the National Executive Committee of the Superintendents' Association. His views do not necessarily represent the views of either association.

serious impact on their future viability and more creative approaches need to be developed. Perhaps the provision of temporary replacement equipment should be part of the operational planning.

### Community intelligence

As the service enters a period of unprecedented activity in counter-terrorism, the potential for conflict with minority communities is higher than ever. In order to maintain the mandate for policing by consent, the service must continue to anticipate the potential rubbing points and develop strategies to minimise the impact on our future relationships.

Community intelligence lies at the heart of our efforts to combat terrorism and this is underpinned by trust. Whilst strong community relationships often exist between local police and communities, there is frequently an underlying suspicion of the security services which impacts upon the willingness of the community to provide information or share their suspicions. In recent developments Special Branch officers have stepped out of the shadows to engage directly with communities through Independent Advisory Groups and mosque committees to encourage the free-flow of intelligence and share suspicions. This approach is to be commended but is by no means a widespread practice and should be encouraged as business as usual.

Neighbourhood policing provides enormous potential to strengthen trust and encourage the sharing of information with our communities through regular dialogue and the building of mutual respect. High quality policing delivered sensitively in an approachable style is essential in building safer harmonious neighbourhoods. Whilst this may seem a daunting task for those officers on their first day, the reality is that the terrorist threat is likely to be with them for the rest of their service. The British police service should be rightly proud that it remains one of the few police services in

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