

CHAPTER 4

THE LONDON EXPERIENCE OF SECTOR POLICING

As has been argued in Chapter 1, the origins of sector policing as introduced by London's Metropolitan Police in the early 1990s lie squarely within the broad tradition of what is widely—if somewhat confusingly—known as community policing. This chapter begins with a brief description of the framework for sector policing used in London in 1991, and then considers its implementation in one area of north London.

Guidelines on sector policing were issued in 1991 within months of the Metropolitan Police's senior managers approving the shift to a new, geographical style of policing. Issued in the name of the Assistant Commissioner responsible for the delivery of front line policing services across London, the guidance was contained in three slim 40 page booklets.⁷⁴ The implementation strategy was studiously low key and contained "as little prescriptive instruction as possible in order to provide the most flexible framework for divisions to work within".⁷⁵ Sector policing was to be implemented throughout the Metropolitan Police area by the end of March 1993. Yet, a year before that, when activity across the organisation was at or nearing its peak, the headquarters branch responsible for monitoring its introduction had a skeleton staff of no more than four, relatively junior, officers.

The main principles of sector policing are set out in the guidance document and can be summarised as being to:

- make the most effective use of resources;
- work in close co-operation with the local community;
- "own" and "get ahead" of local problems by identifying and helping to tackle their underlying causes;
- encourage visible and accessible patrolling by known local officers;
- deliver a "better quality service" provided by officers "enjoying the support and approval of local people—policing by consent".⁷⁶

As this summary indicates, the key features of community policing captured in the CAMPS formula discussed in Chapter 1 were present in the London model of sector policing: *consultation* and co-operation with the community; the *adaptation* of organisational structures to give greater autonomy to sector managers; and the *mobilisation* of civil society and other governmental agencies in identifying and *solving* local *problems*. Also apparent in the framework were the elements of geographical responsibility, problem-solving, community consultation and consumer-friendly managerialism from which the origins of sector policing were earlier traced.

Holloway, North London: a case study

To see how these principles were put into practice, a study of the implementation of sector policing undertaken by one of the authors in the Holloway area of north London between October 1991 and February 1993 will be considered.⁷⁷

Back in the early 1990s, what was then the Holloway Division (a division was roughly equivalent to a SAPS police station area) covered a fairly typical slice of inner-city London. Figures from the 1991 census indicate that it had a total population of 86,352 living in just over 38,000 separate households. More than a fifth of the population (22%) came from minority ethnic groups, mainly of Caribbean, South Asian and African origin. A similar proportion of residents (20%) was under the age of 16. Unemployment—at 20% of the economically active resident population in January 1993—was significantly higher than the greater London average of 12%. Housing in the area was dominated by the public and social sectors with more than half (53%) of households living in accommodation rented either from the local authority or a voluntary housing association.

A total of 49,682 calls for service were logged on the computer-aided despatch (CAD) system at Holloway in 1992, and the Division also recorded 13,498 notifiable criminal offences.⁷⁸ To meet this demand, Holloway had 173 uniformed police constables in post as of 22 December 1992, almost a fifth (19%) of whom were probationers in their first two years of service. Above them in supervisory and managerial positions, the Division had 38 uniformed sergeants, eight inspectors, two chief inspectors, a superintendent and a chief superintendent.

Restructuring the police organisation

In putting the changes demanded by sector policing into effect, Holloway Division adapted the sector policing guidelines to suit local conditions. Having undertaken the suggested workload analysis, the Division decided to create three sectors—Highbury, Tollington and Archway—each with its own local base. Responsibility for policing each of these areas was then entrusted to six teams of about half a dozen uniformed officers (making 18 teams in all) supervised by one or two ‘team sergeants’. Contrary to advice in the official guidance note that responsibility for local policing should be invested in a clearly identifiable individual, each sector was put under the command of two ‘sector inspectors’.

A new shift system was devised that preserved the three traditional ‘turns’ known as ‘earlies’ (6h00 to 14h00) ‘lates’ (14h00 to 20h00) and ‘nights’ (20h00 to 6h00) but added new ‘day’ (8h00 or 10h00 to 16h00 or 18h00) and ‘evening’ or ‘late/late’ (18h00 to 2h00) shifts. The creation of these shifts was intended to align the availability of personnel more closely with the demand for police services on weekend evenings, and by giving officers more time in which to solve problems rather than respond to calls for service on day shifts throughout the rest of the week.⁷⁹ To put some flesh on these bare organisational bones—and gain more insight into the impact of sector policing on police and public in practice—we return to the four themes of geographical responsibility, community consultation, problem-solving and consumer-friendly management identified earlier.

Sectors and the allocation of geographical responsibility

The idea of teams of police officers taking responsibility for meeting the policing needs of a small area, getting to know and be known by its resident and working populations, and recognising locals’ problems as their own, lay at the heart of sector policing.

Scale

Putting these ideals into practice on the ground in Holloway proved harder than the framers of sector policing anticipated. The first problem was simply one of scale. Although the Division had been split into three sectors, the officers on the six dedicated teams in each sector were still responsible for areas

with average resident populations of only slightly fewer than 30,000 people (or 13,000 households). This meant that they were simply not close enough to the ground to forge the kind of relationships with locals that home beat officers (as London's community constables were called) working patches less than a quarter of the size, were able to maintain. As one long serving home beat officer observed, he and his colleagues were 'on our beats for good'—there was no escaping from local people and their problems. Whereas sector officers—though more geographically constrained than before—could still work a whole sector, using this relative freedom to do more or less what they wanted, and to avoid getting bogged down in community problem-solving.

Even where one might have expected the effects of decentralisation to have been most keenly felt, the 'footprint' of more regular patrol by sector officers seemed to be highly localised. So, for example, the establishment of a new sector office on the site of a local hospital seemed to have little effect on how the area as a whole was policed:

People have said to me—just generally in the street and at meetings—that they have not noticed any extra foot patrols, and extra contact as such with police on a day to day basis, other than calling them to something specific. So...I haven't really found that much difference [between sector and traditional relief policing]. (Home beat officer, 10 December 1992)

Sector integrity

Apart from the size of the area for which they were responsible, another critical factor in determining the extent to which officers were able to identify with a sector and own its people's problems became known as 'sector integrity'. At Holloway, this was taken to be a function of the proportion of calls for service on a sector to which a response was provided by an officer from that sector. However, a study of a sample of 370 calls undertaken for an internal police evaluation suggests that no more than 60% of calls were likely to receive a 'sector' response, which means that there would have been no more than a 36% chance of any (let alone the same) sector officer being called to two separate incidents at the same location.

Thus, in practical terms, sector policing provided officers with only a very limited incentive to identify, own and 'get ahead' of problems underlying repeat calls for service in the manner suggested in the official guidelines. Another

indication of how difficult it proved to persuade officers to see their job in terms of responsibility for geographical areas rather than slices of time, was the gradual development of a sense of solidarity between officers on teams working the same shift patterns across sector boundaries. Instead of seeing themselves as joint owners of local problems with sector colleagues they rarely met, officers tended to identify with team members from other sectors who worked the same hours, and with whom they came into regular contact in canteens, on training days and at major incidents.

Ownership

The combined effect of the size of the areas they were expected to police, the difficulty of maintaining 'sector integrity' at levels where officers might be encouraged to solve underlying problems rather than simply respond to incidents, and the persistence of peer group solidarity based on shared responsibility for a block of time rather than a piece of ground, left the ideal of sector ownership largely unrealised at Holloway.

The authors of the only other contemporary study of sector policing reported remarkably similar findings.⁸⁰ Activity surveys of police officers in the areas they studied found no consistent evidence of changes in police practice consistent with sector-based problem-oriented policing. Nor did the introduction of a new style of policing at their research sites have a marked impact on public perceptions of the police. Only a quarter of residents surveyed noticed any change in the way their areas were policed, of whom most had noticed an increase in the number of officers patrolling in vehicles and on foot. Although residents in one area thought that the police were making a greater effort to consult them, the overall assessment of the police by members of the public at both sites was less favourable after the experiments had been completed than it had been before they began.

Sector working groups and community consultation

Under the London model of sector policing, responsibility for consultation with the community about local problems and police priorities was given to sector inspectors. The main mechanism for consultation was to be sector working groups (SWGs). Modelled on the consultative groups set up in the 1980s, these groups were to act as a "police service users group through which the public could raise concerns of an essentially local nature".⁸¹ But this

was not all, for they were also to provide a “forum for the police to meet with other interested agencies to discuss and implement agreed and co-ordinated solutions to identified local problems”.

Thus SWGs were seen both as a source of community input into the process of problem identification, and a setting for mobilising and managing the response of the police and other agencies to those problems. The guidance also advised sector inspectors to ensure that, wherever possible, issues that are best dealt with by other agencies were passed on to them openly and in public so that people become more fully aware of the different roles and responsibilities of local service providers. As for membership of SWGs, the guidance suggested that it should be drawn from three main groups: residents, businesses and representatives of other agencies working in the area.⁸²

The existence of a network of neighbourhood forums set up by the local authority to monitor the delivery of other local services such as housing, planning and transport, allowed Holloway Division to delay the establishment of separate SWGs along the lines recommended in the guidance. On two of the Division’s three sectors, the police simply tapped into these forums and policing became another regular agenda item for discussion by the elected street representatives and delegates. Only on the third sector did the two inspectors set up a separate consultative body drawn from the area’s neighbourhood forums and known as the Highbury Sector Crime Panel (HSCP).⁸³

Creating communities

The first problem to emerge from the creation of the HSCP had to do with the way in which ‘the community’ was first created by, and then represented to, the police on the Highbury sector. The official guidance recommended that sectors should be demarcated on the basis of a ‘profile’ containing information on geographical features and existing administrative and political boundaries, together with a thorough analysis of police workload. Enough sectors would have to be created to reflect the ‘individuality’ of local communities, but not so many as to create insoluble internal problems of administration and co-ordination.

As it turned out in Holloway, the administrative convenience of having policing areas that fitted with existing political boundaries and the smaller areas covered by neighbourhood forums, prevailed. Unfortunately, as one participant in the HSCP commented, a genuine ‘community’ of people with

common interests could not be conjured up by drawing lines on a map.⁸⁴ To describe a sector as a community was “baloney”. He and members of the residents’ association he represented might share some concerns with people elsewhere on the sector but their most immediate problems were typical of their area—consisting in his mind of no more than one or two streets.

However much the police tried to persuade themselves that either the HSCP or the neighbourhood forums represented people with a common view of what the most important local problems were, and a shared interest in resolving them, the reality of conflict and disagreement was impossible to escape. When members of the HSCP complained about problems of drug-taking and burglary in two blocks of flats, discussion of what do about them ground to a halt when it emerged that the drug users and housebreakers came from the immediate area. In so far as ‘community’ was defined by location or territory, problems tended to come not from outside that community but from within it. Sectors had been carved out of larger police areas but ‘communities’ had not been created where none existed before.

Representing communities

Whether they could be described as ‘communities’ or not, the way in which people living and working on the sector were represented on HSCP was equally problematic. Although Holloway was an area of considerable ethnic diversity, the membership of HSCP was exclusively white, overwhelmingly middle-aged and already active in existing local organisations. Even to the police, neither HSCP nor the neighbourhood forums were properly representative of local people. To blunt-speaking rank and file officers, their members were not legitimate community representatives but interfering ‘busy-bodies’ whose meetings consisted of “one or two lunatics going on about dog crap and parking”.⁸⁵

Having put themselves forward or been nominated to represent the sector’s five neighbourhood forums, members reflected the views of a segment of self-consciously respectable public opinion with robust views on crime and what should be done about it. Turning a blind eye to petty crime and disorder was the ‘thin end of the wedge’ and they demanded that the police ‘stop the rot’ by taking firm action against everyone from small-time shoplifters to people cycling on pavements and the owners of incontinent dogs.⁸⁶ Just how wide a gulf there was between these essentially ‘pro-police’ figures and at least some of the people they were supposed to represent is captured in these two

reactions to the regular presence of uniformed police in two areas of public housing on Highbury sector:

Our community policemen...I see them walking up and down and they're all we've got between us and anarchy and I'd like to thank them.

I'm going to get a petition up about police coming on this estate. I don't want any police on my estate.⁸⁷

The first quotation is from a middle-aged white woman speaking at a meeting of her local neighbourhood forum while the second conveys the feelings of a young African Caribbean woman speaking to a sector officer out on patrol only a few days later.

Identifying problems

The broadly supportive attitudes of the members of HSCP and the neighbourhood forums from which they came, made them congenial company for the police. But the friendliness of the participants was not enough for meetings of these bodies to be judged a success, for the principal purpose of consultation with the public at sector level was to assist the police in identifying local problems.

The difficulty was that, despite its status as a *crime* panel, analysis of the 35 identifiable problems raised over the course of its first five meetings showed that two thirds (23) were related to traffic, parking and the anti-social use of roads and pavements. Another six involved behaviour—drug-taking, public urination, prostitution, intimidation and young people causing trouble in a block of flats—that may well have been criminal but fell some way short of what police officers themselves saw as 'real police work'. Thus, only five of the problems raised at HSCP meetings fitted with police views of the kind of 'real crime'—burglary, street robbery and criminal damage to property—officers believed they should prioritise.

The HSCP came up with so few crime problems and so many quality of life issues, not because (as some police officers liked to think) its members rated cycling on pavements as more serious problem than housebreaking, but because—even in a relatively high crime area of London—such incivilities were part of their daily experience of life in a way that 'real crime' was not:

I've never seen a mugging in my life...but I walk out of my front door and see people [illegally] double-parking every day.⁸⁸

Research has shown that people (at least in Britain) react to different kinds of troublesome behaviour in different ways.⁸⁹ What they see as 'real crime' is more likely to be reported to the police more or less as it happens than less serious, though still concerning, incidents.⁹⁰ The result is that the police tend to have a much more complete picture of 'real crime' problems than even the best-informed member of the public in the highest crime area. This asymmetry in access to information about the most serious local problems can only be corrected if the police provide the people they are talking to with comprehensive, and comprehensible, information about crime. A genuine dialogue between police and community representatives about how those problems should be prioritised and resolved demands that the police go beyond the kind of grudging disclosure of raw crime data that eventually happened at meetings of the HSCP.

Forums for inter-agency co-operation

If HSCP largely failed to represent either a cross-section of local people or reflect their concerns in a way that was credible to police officers, it also fell short of the mark in its role as an inter-agency forum for discussing how those concerns should be addressed. Representatives from other service providers were notable only by their absence at meetings. As a consequence, problems that required action from non-police agencies such as speeding, the removal of abandoned vehicles and illegal street trading had to be referred on to the relevant agency or local government department on an *ad hoc* basis either by the police or panel members. In the event, little or nothing ever came of any of HSCP's problem solving efforts. Almost a third of the issues had been raised when HSCP first met in July 1992. Nevertheless, it was impossible to conclude that, of the 35 problems identified at that and four subsequent meetings, a single one had been resolved when fieldwork for the research ended in March 1993.

Tasking and problem-solving

As discussed above, the preoccupation of community representatives on the HSCP with traffic and other quality of life problems failed to impress the sector-based officers tasked to resolve them. From the earliest days of its

implementation at Holloway, it became axiomatic that sector policing would, as one senior manager put it, “live or die” on the Division’s ability to identify problems and allocate them to sector officers as clearly defined and credible policing tasks.⁹⁴ Six months after sector policing began, the internal evaluation duly declared the problem identification and tasking system a success though very little was said about the *analysis* of problems so critical to Herman Goldstein’s original vision of problem-oriented policing).⁹²

A total of 102 tasks had been undertaken across the three sectors, of which 85% had been community-generated, usually as a result of “formal contact through Sector Working Parties or Neighbourhood Forum meetings”. The evaluation conceded that some sector officers had been disappointed about the range of actions they had been asked to take but attributed this to a lack of public understanding about the role of the police and to “a degree of satisfaction with current police performance”. Tasks ranging from crime problems at a particular location (like drug-dealing or handling stolen goods) to “short term community problem[s] associated with parking or anti-social behaviour” had been identified and notable successes had been achieved in the shape of multi-agency law enforcement action against “[car] window washers and [unlicensed] street traders”.

An incredible success story?

Despite the successes noted above, there was—on closer inspection—little substantial evidence to support such an optimistic conclusion about early experiences of problem-solving policing in Holloway. Asked by the research team for more detailed information about these problem-solving efforts, the Division was unable to come up either with a comprehensive list of the 102 problems referred to in the evaluation, or with an explanation of what exactly had been done in response to them. Nor could it explain how the problem-solving work had been assessed (another key element in Goldstein’s account of problem-oriented policing). It was also hard to believe that carrying out what, on the report’s own admission, were often fairly minor tasks, can have taken up many, never mind all, of the 4,992 officer hours worked on problem-solving ‘day’ shifts in the six months from April to October 1992 covered by the internal evaluation.⁹³ From the point of view of the researcher observing HSCP and neighbourhood forum meetings and talking to police officers in the course of their work, the reality of the problem-solving/tasking process was altogether less satisfactory than the authors of the internal evaluation felt able to admit.

Problem-solving, real police work and doing your own thing

One major obstacle that the already unpopular quality of life problems identified by community representatives had to face before they were adopted as operational tasks, was competition from a steady stream of traditional, and highly credible, 'real crime' tasks generated internally by the Division's Information and Intelligence Unit (DIIU). Sector officers continued to be briefed, and brief themselves, on the basis of crime statistics churned out by the DIIU. And they continued to respond to the familiar crimes of street robbery, burglary, and vehicle crime reflected in those figures—not by analysing the underlying problems and devising creative 'tailor-made' solutions to them—but by resorting to the traditional police tactics of patrol and selective enforcement.

But even highly credible police-generated crime data did little to inform most routine patrol work. Infinitely preferable to any form of directed activity was the ability to 'do your own thing'. Day shift officers who should have been using 'free' time to work on community problems, found a whole range of alternative attractions hard to resist. Many simply ignored injunctions to avoid taking calls unless absolutely necessary, and hitched rides with motorised colleagues doing response work. Others sought out 'real police work'—or as close an approximation of it as they could find—to keep themselves occupied. Opportunities to undertake plain clothes observations, stop and search suspects on the street or execute warrants for the arrest of people who had not bought a television licence were taken up with enthusiasm. Still others used the time to pursue a personal interest in a particular aspect of police work such as traffic enforcement. Wild tales also circulated about officers 'disappearing' to get a haircut, go shopping, or take a swim at a nearby pool.

Moreover, such careless attitudes towards these problem-solving shifts were scarcely discouraged by managers' eagerness to give officers leave when they were working 'days' and to use them as a pool of 'spare' resources to be drawn on whenever personnel were needed to meet regular commitments to deliver extra police strength elsewhere in London.

Problem-solving since sector policing

Since sector policing was introduced in London in the early 1990s, problem-oriented policing (POP) has become an increasingly popular solution to rising demand for police services in Britain.⁹⁴ It also sits comfortably with research evidence that crime and other incidents requiring police attention are far from

randomly distributed, and an emerging consensus that crime and related forms of troublesome behaviour can best be dealt with by the police working in partnership with other agencies. But this enthusiasm has not translated into universally successful attempts at implementation.

On the contrary, a large-scale study of problem solving undertaken by the Inspector of Constabulary for England and Wales found that, of 335 initiatives submitted by forces for consideration by the inspection team, only 17 (or one in 20) were described as successful by the forces themselves *and* could be judged to have “fully followed a problem-solving approach”.⁹⁵ More detailed studies have tended to confirm these findings, revealing higher but still disappointing rates of successful problem identification, analysis and resolution (29% in one carefully monitored area), persistent difficulties in mobilising communities to take part in the problem-solving process, and serious weaknesses in attempts to graft POP on to existing styles of policing, particularly in the face of resistance to its introduction by the most experienced officers.⁹⁶

Managing sector policing

Overcoming resistance to the introduction of sector policing—particularly among the longest serving officers most committed to traditional ways of working under the traditional time-based ‘relief’ system—was one of the most significant challenges faced by managers at Holloway.⁹⁷ When researchers arrived at Holloway five months before sector policing began, they were left in no doubt about its unpopularity. “It’s shit”, “it stinks”, “it’s a load of crap” were among the views expressed by officers in the course of one shift observed early in the research.⁹⁸ But why was sector policing so unpopular among so many of the more experienced officers?

Human resources

The most obvious source of discontent was that, however good an idea sector policing might be in theory (and many officers were prepared to concede that it might be), there simply were not enough people at Holloway to make it work. The accuracy of this claim was hard to establish. Statistics presented in the internal evaluation indicated that, during the first 6 months of sector policing, Holloway operated with less than the agreed minimum number of officers required to police the Division for just over 10% of the time.⁹⁹ No comparative statistics were given for the preceding 6 months but the evaluation described

this performance as no better than 'mixed'. Observational data collected by the researchers suggested that there were times when any question of investigating, let alone solving, the underlying causes of the incidents officers were being called to attend was out of the question. They were too busy to do anything more than 'fire brigade' policing, rushing from one call to the next with no time to engage either callers or other members of the public in any kind of dialogue. But this was not true of the majority of shifts observed, and the researchers concluded that sector policing was not manifestly unworkable within the prevailing resource constraints.

What was undeniable were the very real concerns that many officers had for their own safety and that of their colleagues on those occasions—however rare—when the Division was significantly under strength, particularly late at night and in the early hours of the morning. Such fears crystallised around particular incidents on nearby divisions including the murder of a police officer. Accustomed to the reassuring presence of as many as 40 people to call on at any time of the day or night, officers feared for what might happen when the number on duty at, say, 3.00 am might be less than half that under sector policing arrangements. Where, they wanted to know, would the back up needed to deal with a major incident, or to aid a colleague in (perhaps mortal) danger come from? A few dissenting voices argued that 'turning up mob-handed' could be a recipe for disaster in some situations, while others thought that the potential lack of fast back up might encourage a less confrontational approach to dealing with the public. But to the majority, sector policing represented a real threat to their safety in an already dangerous job.

Communicating the vision

Without a massive—and highly improbable—injection of new resources, there was very little either local managers at Holloway or senior management of the Metropolitan Police itself could do to counter fears that sector policing was being introduced 'on the cheap'. But in two other respects the unpopularity of sector policing was attributable to problems more susceptible to managerial control. The first of these was an apparent failure by those responsible for implementing sector policing at Holloway and across London to explain to their staff either why it was being introduced or what the principles underlying it were. Even when the nuts and bolts of sector policing—the new shift system, the demarcation of sectors and the allocation of geographical responsibility—had been grasped, few officers understood the philosophy behind it. Nor did they appreciate or share the vision of an efficient, accessible,

accountable, community-based service it was supposed to realise. In their understandable eagerness to make sector policing work, managers seemed to have neglected the equally important task of convincing their staff why it had to work. As has already been noted, similar communication problems arose when sector policing was initially introduced in Johannesburg.

Setting priorities

Communication was not the only factor behind the unpopularity of sector policing. According to the Metropolitan Police's five year corporate strategy for the mid 1990s, 1992/3 was to be "the focus year of maximum organisation activity" for the introduction of sector policing. Yet its apparent strategic priority did not give sector policing precedence over other policies. So, for example, a new strategy for the management of police buildings, and procedures for the investigation of crime, ran counter to the thrust of sector policing by encouraging the concentration of resources at a single divisional headquarters building and justifying a continued centralisation of detective functions. The result was both confusion and a severe case of innovation fatigue.

Another distraction came from the organisational tier above the Division known as 'Area' and took the form of continual requests for Holloway officers to provide 'aid' to other parts of London at precisely the time—in April 1992—when sector policing was in its early infancy. Worse still, the efforts of sector teams to respond to public demands for action on the quality of life problems identified at neighbourhood forum meetings and the HSCP, had to struggle for priority against competing crime objectives set centrally by the police organisation itself. Thus Holloway had to take part in a high profile, London-wide anti-burglary initiative and 'Area' insisted that a special squad be set up to respond to worsening statistics on vehicle crime.

Frustrated though they were by demands from above, divisional managers were themselves guilty of at least attempting to infringe the principle of decentralisation whereby sector inspectors were expected to set their own priorities in consultation with local people. Demands for greater downward pressure to be exerted on figures for reported burglary prompted one frustrated sector sergeant to observe that "We've got to respond to their [the public's] needs not [the divisional commander's]".¹⁰⁰ Caught between the two groups—managers and consumers—to whom the precepts of the new managerialism would have them account, front line sector staff regularly found themselves being pulled in opposite directions.

Managing performance

The apparent conflict between the priorities of managers within the police and consumers leads on to another difficulty with the management of sector policing. In theory any assessment of the performance of sector inspectors and the operational officers under their command should have taken as its starting point their success in identifying and resolving substantive community problems. To do this, two major obstacles had to be overcome. Firstly the Division had to expand the information on which judgements about performance were based from traditional crime and process records relating to the number of offences reported and arrests made by an individual or unit. And secondly it had to ensure that it was not simply output that was being measured but outcomes.

In neither case were Holloway's efforts entirely successful. The regular publication of crime and arrest statistics by the Divisional Information and Intelligence Unit was halted following the intervention of a senior manager. However, unofficial figures continued to circulate, leading sector teams committed to working in schools or calling back on victims of crime to doubt that their performance against the stated objectives of a community-based style of policing would ever be properly acknowledged. As it happened 'traditional workload' crime, arrest and (call) response time figures were published in Holloway's internal evaluation, but only for the purposes of comparing the whole Division's performance for the first six months of sector policing with the preceding period of relief policing.¹⁰¹ The same document also contained impressive sounding output measures of public contact in the form of visits to local schools, additional support for crime victims, meetings with community groups and calls to give crime prevention advice. Sadly lacking however were baseline data for the old system of relief policing and any qualitative assessment of the outcome of these interactions between police and public.

Autonomy and resistance

Even if avoidable mistakes were made in managing the implementation of sector policing, the root cause of the unpopularity was that it challenged some core beliefs, values and practices in the occupational culture of operational police officers. Much has been written about police culture and the elementary mistake should not be made of pretending that it is either monolithic or unchanging.¹⁰² But it is widely accepted that the ability to exert some measure of control over their working lives is of critical importance to most

uniformed patrol officers. Since they work under uncertain and often dangerous conditions where the support of trusted colleagues may be needed at any moment, police officers tend to be suspicious of new-fangled theories and reluctant to accept changes based on them.

The way in which sector policing—a new style of deployment rooted in the still slightly obscure philosophy of community-based policing—clashed with rank and file attitudes towards their operational autonomy was best summed up in a chance comment made by a junior manager right at the beginning of the research in Holloway: “They like night duties because there are no gov’ners [senior managers] and no public and they can get on with some real police work”.¹⁰³

Sector policing sought to redirect patrol officers’ attention away from the varied, and at least potentially exciting, work of taking calls, responding to incidents and ‘fighting crime’. Rather, they were to deal with a diverse set of ‘unreal’ problems identified by people—‘the community’—perceived to be ill-qualified to know what was good for them. By breaking shifts consisting of about 30 constables loosely supervised by half a dozen sergeants down into smaller teams, and giving the latter much clearer line responsibility for managing the former, it threatened to increase the organisational visibility of patrol operations. Worse still, sector policing would put limits of both time and place on opportunities for ‘real police work’ and ‘doing your own thing’. In short, officers did not relish the prospect of working additional days on public priorities under the gaze of senior managers, at the expense of night shifts when they could follow their own operational instincts, safe in the knowledge that both managers and the public were safely in bed. Nor did they like the thought of having to stay on their sectors, quiet as they might be, instead of roaming a whole Division looking for action.

The challenges of managing change

Three loosely connected but important points emerge from all this. The first is that the capacity of police managers to control their own organisation and the actions of the people who actually ‘do’ policing is not nearly as extensive as either they, or people who rely on them to change police practice in government of civil society, tend to believe. The second is that, inasmuch as sector policing challenged the operational autonomy of the rank and file by exposing their activities to more effective bureaucratic control and more extensive community influence, change was either resisted or subverted. As a

result—and this is the third and final point—patrol officers on Holloway seemed no more accountable to their managers and through them either internally up the organisational hierarchy or externally to ‘consumers’ and the ‘community’ after nine months of sector policing than they had been before.

What became of sector policing in London?

When the research team left Holloway in early 1993, sector policing had been in place for almost a year. Ambitious plans were already being laid to extend geographical responsibility, for example by decentralising crime investigation to sectors.¹⁰⁴ Yet, almost ten years later, sector policing as a distinctive style of policing, and a framework for the community-oriented delivery of front line police services to the people of London, has *ceased to exist*. Possible reasons for this are considered in the concluding section of this case study, along with how, despite its demise, some of the principles, practices and language of sector policing (including the word ‘sector’ itself) have survived into the new millennium.¹⁰⁵

Territorial policing in London: 1992–2002

The official guidance on sector policing in London was intended to provide a flexible framework for the delivery of non-specialist territorial policing to the people of London. This flexibility was intended to allow the 70 and more divisional commanders and management teams responsible for implementing the new style to adapt the framework to suit local conditions. It also allowed them to implement sector policing at different speeds and with varying degrees of enthusiasm. The divisional commander at Holloway—described as a “purist” by one of our interviewees—was totally committed to the principles of geographical responsibility, managerial reform, community consultation and problem-solving that informed sector policing. Some of his peers were more sceptical and Holloway went further than most in pushing these principles to their logical conclusion.

The first point about the fate of sector policing is therefore that, from the outset, its implementation was extremely uneven. While Holloway pressed on with the decentralisation of detective functions, other divisions paid no more than lip service to the basics.¹⁰⁶ Thus, when one of our interviewees started work on a police division in south London in 1996, he found the old time-based relief system still in operation. Geographical responsibility was limited

to the notional allocation of each of these teams to a sector on which they were expected to do problem-solving work if and when the pressures of responding to calls for service permitted.

Apart from its uneven implementation across London, sector policing also seems to have suffered from a number of ultimately fatal weaknesses, most of which were evident from its introduction at Holloway. From its inception as an outcome of the centrally driven PLUS programme, sector policing was very much a top-down reform. Even those divisions that did least to implement it had to do something. But the changes in structure and working practices that sector policing demanded were never 'owned' by more than a minority of enthusiasts at divisional level. There was, as one of the officers we spoke to put it, no "sustainability plan" to guard it against shocks to the wider organisation. And unfortunately for sector policing, these were not long in coming.

In essence these shocks took two forms. First there was a steady and measurable decline in police numbers from 28,500 in 1991 to 25,400 ten years later—a fall of some 11%.¹⁰⁷ Whether this coincided with an increase in workload is hotly debated, but the academic authors of an authoritative report on the Metropolitan Police have recently concluded that it probably did not.¹⁰⁸ Be that as it may, the officers to whom we spoke were convinced that this process of 'slow rot' had a severe impact on the ability of the Metropolitan Police to resource its commitment to sector policing.

Such a reduction in resources alone might well have proved fatal, but it was combined with another threat from a slightly different direction. This took the form of a fresh wave of targets and performance standards imposed in the wake of the then Prime Minister, John Major's, Citizen's Charter initiative. These standards tended to emphasise performance against traditional 'hard' crime targets and were enforced with scarcely diminished rigour when the Labour Party came to power in 1997. While the long term problem-solving work of sector policing might eventually reduce demand for police services, statistical targets for the time taken to respond to emergency calls and the judicial disposal of criminal cases had to be met in the here and now. The inevitable result was that available resources became increasingly focused on dealing with the traditional priorities of crime fighting and incident response. And this, of course, was precisely the kind of work traditionalist opponents of sector policing had always hankered after. In the end their resistance to its introduction and continued subversion of its aims bore fruit, albeit in the context of a performance management regime that did little to enhance their operational autonomy.

Ward constables and sector working groups

This is not the place to attempt a chronology of the decline of sector policing in London in its fully developed form. But if one single development can be said to have marked its final slide into obscurity, it was the introduction of ‘borough policing’ in 1999. This reform was prompted by the need to align the boundaries of basic command units in the Metropolitan Police with those of the 32 borough councils¹⁰⁹ responsible for providing a range of public services from development planning to education, housing and personal social services such as child protection.

New legislation introduced by the incoming Labour government (the Crime and Disorder Act of 1998) required the police and local government to work together as strategic partners in drawing up and implementing local plans for reducing crime and disorder. Prior to 1999, boroughs outside central London had been policed by two—sometimes three—different police divisions. This had long created problems in co-ordinating both policing within borough boundaries, and partnerships working between the police and local government. The need to respond to the Crime and Disorder Act made an already awkward position untenable, and divisions were hurriedly amalgamated to form single borough command units.

The effect of this reorganisation was to shift responsibility for solving borough-wide problems up to the crime and disorder reduction partnerships established between the police, the local authorities and other agencies (such as the probation service) at that level. A similar realignment was also taking place at a much lower level. Responsibility for the wards (into which boroughs were divided for electoral purposes) was allocated to new community-based ‘ward constables’ responsible for identifying and resolving—again in partnership with local government and other agencies—problems of a more localised nature. Meanwhile, response policing—the daily grind of dealing with calls for service—was being, or already had been, recentralised from sectors to one or two police stations within each borough command unit.

The only obvious legacy of sector policing to survive the 1990s was a network of local consultative groups. That they did survive was remarkable for several reasons. Dominated by people well disposed towards the police but disillusioned with their local authority, they generally demonstrated what one of our interviewees described as an “inability to join up solutions to problems across agencies and the community”. Nor had they ever managed to convince either the police or anyone else that they were genuinely representative of local

residents. Thus, for the most part, the sector working groups had failed to fulfil the role set out for them in the official guidance on sector policing. Yet, despite all this, these ‘police-constructed’ bodies built up a momentum of their own over the years and were to prove the most durable of all the innovations put in place under sector policing.

From sector policing to borough policing in Holloway

Developments at Holloway over the last ten years have been similar to those elsewhere in London. When one of the officers we spoke to arrived on the Division in 1996 he found things very much as the researchers had left them three years earlier. The most significant change was that, although the investigation of crime remained largely a central, divisional function, small teams of two or three detectives had been attached to each sector under the Phase II proposals referred to earlier.

Coming in with a reputation, as he put it, as ‘Mr Community’ and a generally positive attitude towards sector policing, he was dismayed to find Holloway a rather unhappy place: the Division seemed to lack cohesion, was disjointed, “people were doing their own thing”, and there was a distinct lack of *esprit de corps*. Much of this unhappiness could be attributed to sector policing. Staff shrinkage, the loss of economies of scale occasioned by the radicalism of the Division’s decentralisation and a growing tension between the demands of reactive incident response and proactive problem-solving all contributed to low morale. From a manager’s point of view, the three sector system was frustrating because it was often impossible to find out which officers were on duty at any given time and—more importantly—who could be trusted with the most difficult and sensitive work.

Two years later, in 1998, a decision was taken to restructure the Division by reducing the number of sectors from three to two. The aim was to maintain a commitment to geographic policing at a time of (amongst other things) mounting pressure on human resources, changes in the policing strategy of the Metropolitan Police, and the need to meet the requirements of what was to become the Crime and Disorder Act. Other more local factors behind the decision to reshape sector policing, were the appointment of a less ‘purist’ divisional commander, persistent fears among officers for their own and their colleagues’ safety, and a general feeling that Holloway had “gone soft” and lost its ability “to react to big events”. What emerged from the 1998 restructuring was a hybrid style of policing. Responsibility for incident response was

centralised once again and entrusted to five teams of officers based at the main Holloway police station. Meanwhile problem-solving and proactive work was left with specialised staff based on the two remaining, and now much enlarged, sectors.

Not much more than a year later, this revised structure was dismantled following the introduction of borough policing and the amalgamation of Holloway Division with its immediate neighbour. At this point, the original meaning of the term ‘sector’ was lost, as what had been the old Holloway Division was redesignated the North Sector of the new Islington borough command. Twenty-four hour incident response capability was maintained at this sector level and responsibility for proactive work shared between eight geographically responsible ward constables or community contact officers. These constables were backed up by a similar number of officers allocated to a specialist centrally-based problem-solving team.

Problem-solving and community consultation

With the transformation of the old Holloway *Division* into the new North *Sector*, and the consolidation of both crime investigation and response policing at what amounted to divisional level, the framework of sector policing set out in the 1991 guidance had been destroyed. But all was not lost. The kind of crime tasks the new breed of police problem-solvers (intelligence gathering ward constables and specialist team members) would be asked to perform might seem very different to the quality of life concerns from which their sector-based predecessors had recoiled. However, a commitment to problem-solving remained.¹¹⁰ So too did sector-level community consultation in the form of the Highbury Sector Crime Panel. Faced with attempts by the police to amalgamate it with another working group to form a single North Sector Working Group, HSCP refused to disband and continued to function at the time (October 2002) interviews for this case study were conducted, more than a decade after it was first established.

However, the police have learned the hard lessons of the early 1990s and the inspector who attends HSCP meetings is now at pains to ensure that only crime problems likely to be susceptible to police action are passed on to ward constables and the sector problem-solving team. What interviewees described as “non-police matters” are passed on for other agencies to deal with—something which its members have grown to accept as they have become more realistic in their view of what the police can achieve.

Sector policing in London: Lessons for South Africa

Before discussing the lessons from the experience of sector policing in London for South Africa, some words of caution are necessary. London is the capital city of a rich country with a long history of stable democratic government—and a well-established system of policing to match. South Africa is a poor country that is relatively new both to democratic government and constitutional policing. In London, sector policing had to be flexible enough to work in the suburbs as well as inner-city areas like Holloway. In South Africa, it has to work not just in Sandton and Soweto, but also in the Karoo and on the banks of the Kei River. In this section, some of the key lessons from the London experience are distilled. These are followed up with implied questions for the South African experiment with sector policing covered in Chapter 5 below.

Lessons about structures and communities

- Setting up sectors: The first problem in Holloway was simply one of scale (30,000 people per sector). The sectors were simply not close enough to the ground to allow police officers to forge the kind of relationships with local people that were required.
- Defining sectors: A genuine ‘community’ of people with common interests could not be conjured up by drawing lines on a map. Most people considered ‘their area’ to consist of no more than one or two streets. The reality was of a great deal of conflict and disagreement at the sector level between people from different parts of the sector or from different groups within the sector.
- Representivity of community participants on the Sector Working Groups: Holloway was an area of considerable ethnic diversity. And yet the membership of the HSCP was exclusively white, overwhelmingly middle-aged and already active in existing local organisations. As a result, the HSCP was not properly representative of local people and lacked credibility with the police.
- Competing definitions of problems: Despite its advertised status as a *crime*-focused group, most problems identified by the HSCP were related to incivility, non-criminal behaviour, or the kind of petty crime that fell some way short of what police officers themselves saw as real police

work. Thus, few of the problems raised at HSCP meetings fitted with prevalent police views of what constitutes ‘real crime’.

- Failure of inter-agency problem-solving: HSCP also fell short of the mark in its role as an inter-agency forum. Representatives from other service providers were generally absent, and problems that required action from non-police agencies had to be referred to the relevant agency or local government department on an *ad hoc* basis either by the police or panel members. Little or nothing ever came of any of HSCP’s problem-solving efforts.

Lessons about police culture

- There was a gradual development of a sense of solidarity between officers working the same shift patterns across sector boundaries rather than between sector colleagues, because they rarely met. Officers tended to identify with team members from *other* sectors who worked the same hours, and with whom they came into regular contact in canteens, on training days and at major incidents.
- The root cause of the unpopularity of sector policing was that it challenged some of the core beliefs, values and practices in the occupational culture of operational police officers.
- The capacity of police managers to control their own organisation and the actions of the people who actually ‘do’ policing is not nearly as extensive as either they or people in government or civil society who rely on them to change police practice tend to believe.

Lessons about resources, focus and sustainability

- The most obvious source of discontent was that, however good an idea sector policing might be in theory (and many officers were prepared to concede that it might be), there simply were not enough people at Holloway to make it work.
- Without a massive—and highly improbable—injection of new resources, there was very little either local managers at Holloway or senior management of the Metropolitan Police itself could do to counter fears that sector policing was being introduced ‘on the cheap’.

- Inadequate top-down communication by those responsible for implementing sector policing at Holloway (and all across London) to explain to their staff why it was being introduced or its underlying principles, meant that few police members understood the philosophy behind sector policing.

Lessons about political change and policy sustainability

- Competition with other priorities: Problems identified at meetings of neighbourhood forums and the HSCP had to struggle for priority against competing crime objectives and policing targets set centrally.
- Government's target-setting approach: In order to generate better arrest figures and rapid response data, available resources became increasingly focused on dealing with the traditional priorities of crime fighting and incident response. And this, of course, was precisely the kind of police work that traditionalist opponents of sector policing inside the police organisation had always hankered after.
- After an election in 1997, a new UK government passed fresh legislation, which required partnerships between police and community to be constructed at borough level, rather than divisional or sector level.

In addition to the lessons learned from the Holloway experience, research evaluating the implementation of sector policing elsewhere in Britain¹¹¹ found that:

- there was no consistent evidence of changes in police practice as a result of sector-based problem-oriented policing;
- the introduction of a new style of policing (sector policing or similar) did not have a marked impact on public perceptions of the police.

Lessons about police accountability

One other important lesson from London's experience of sector policing concerns the perennially thorny issue of police accountability, which is central to the police-community relationship. So, in practical terms, what did the introduction of the London model of sector policing do to make policing more

accountable in a place like Holloway? And what might the implementation of the SAPS model do to make the police more accountable in South Africa, and to bridge the gap between police and people?

Sector policing did not set out to change the legal or political mechanisms by which the Metropolitan Police were held to account in London. Nor will the SAPS model do anything to affect the equivalent institutions and procedures established under the terms of the Constitution and the South African Police Services Act.¹¹² To find the mechanisms by which either the SAPS or London models of sector policing may lead (or did lead) to more accountable policing, we must look elsewhere.

Sector policing in London sought to improve police accountability (or “policing by consent” as the official guidance note put it) in two main ways. The first was by establishing sector working groups as a new mechanism for community consultation at sector level. The second was by encouraging geographically-responsible officers to know, and be known on, their sectors and to ‘own’ the problems of the people who lived and worked there. By these two routes, it was hoped that sector-based officers would come to familiarise themselves—and ultimately perhaps to share—the values and priorities of the people they served.

For a whole range of reasons noted earlier, we have seen how difficult it was to make either of these mechanisms work in practice. The Holloway case study showed how sectors were too large and diverse to ‘own’, and the temptation or pressure to do other kinds of work too great, for officers to familiarise themselves with, let alone address, popular concerns. Moreover, while they might have sympathised with the values of the police-friendly minority represented at meetings of neighbourhood forums and the HSCP, officers could not share their apparent obsession with dogs, traffic and other quality of life issues. As a means of making the police more accountable to all shades of local opinion, sector policing in Holloway was not a great success.

As has been discussed in Chapter 3, the SAPS model of sector policing loads the bulk of the responsibility for bridging the gap between police and public on to the shoulders of a sector manager (and an assistant) working with a sector crime forum. Apart from the police, crime forum members may include prominent business people, elected councillors and other community leaders.¹¹³ Insofar as sector policing adds a new mechanism for holding the police to account, that mechanism is the sector crime forum.

Unfortunately neither the history of sector working groups in London nor South Africa's own experience of community consultation at police station level in Community Policing Forums is cause for optimism.¹¹⁴ Unless sector crime forums—unlike CPFs and sector working groups—are able to make themselves genuinely representative of the areas in which they function, are given access to high quality information by the police and take their responsibilities as laid down in the draft framework seriously, it is doubtful that they will make a significant contribution to bridging the gap between police and people.