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Police and Crime Commissioners Lessons for the second generation

UK Public Sector | April 2016



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Introduction

In 2012, voters across England and Wales elected their first ever Police and Crime Commissioners (PCCs). The 41 PCCs returned in those elections have spent three and a half years leading and holding the police to account, whilst figuring out from scratch how to operate and exercise their authority. This May, the next wave of elections will return the second generation of PCCs.

At the time of writing, at least 26 of the incumbent PCCs are set to run for office in the May elections. That means at least one third of the second generation will be new to the job and will face the same steep learning curve as their predecessors. The PCCs that are re-elected will benefit from continuity – but could face the higher expectations that come with a second term in political office.

This guide aims to reflect on the challenges faced by the first generation of PCCs and offer lessons for the second, whether new or returning. Our analysis is augmented by interviews with ten of the first PCCs.

Our interviews suggest that PCCs have shared a number of consistent experiences. Many told us that establishing their authority was a sharp initial challenge in the face of a low election turnout, limited public interest and – in some cases – scepticism among their force’s senior team. Since then, many have led the way in opening up policing debates locally. And most discovered that local knowledge and insight were among their most powerful commodities.

Experiences of the first term PCCs point to nine lessons for the second generation that are set out in this guide. They range from a starting sprint of stakeholder engagement to mastery of local data and the flexibility to cope with the ongoing evolution of the role. None of the lessons suggest that the second generation of PCCs will face fewer challenges than the first. They rather point to a different and less certain term ahead – but with incredible potential to shape the future of policing in England and Wales.



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Reflections from an inaugural term

Before 15 November 2012, no-one had held the office of Police and Crime Commissioner. The 41 people elected that day needed to invent what it means to be a PCC, how they would operate and what they could achieve. Our analysis and interviews point to three major reflections from the past three and a half years.

Establishing a function and authority

The first reflection is that all PCCs faced a sharp initial challenge to establish themselves and their authority – often in inhospitable circumstances. They were elected to office by a historically low voter turnout of 15 per cent and with limited fanfare. As a result, the media questioned their democratic mandate and the public had little understanding of their importance.

Set against that background, PCCs strived to establish effective working relationships with their chief constable and force leadership team. Some were met with resistance, scepticism or uncertainty and many were acutely aware of the massive imbalance of knowledge between themselves as an elected representative and the experienced police professionals with whom they needed to connect. The same difficulties arose as PCCs reached out to the wider set of partners who work alongside the police including local government, the NHS and fire services.

As their term of office comes to an end, many PCCs have shown gravitas, tenacity and resilience to establish their credibility and authority with the public, police and partners.

As well as this initial leadership challenge, each PCC began their first term with an operational challenge as well: most started their new jobs with no infrastructure to support them other than, in some cases, resources inherited from police authorities. While building relationships, PCCs also needed to build functional offices around themselves.

Connecting people and policing

The second reflection from their inaugural term is that PCCs had some real successes in engaging the public. Some told us how their efforts to connect with citizens helped focus police resources on local priorities and, in turn, built public confidence. Others worked with partners on their engagement, piggybacking on communications from others to avoid duplication and promote a citizen-centred message. At their best, PCCs have brought local debates on policing to life. A recent YouGov poll for *The Times* found that 57 per cent of people have some awareness of their PCC. While just ten per cent said they could name them and talk about their policies, these findings are encouraging for the future of PCCs and their connection to the public.

Harnessing local knowledge

The third reflection is that data, evidence and insight are powerful commodities for PCCs. Their role as the people's representatives to the police makes it vital for them to understand local needs and, as a result, priorities. Some found that forces themselves do not exploit their data to its fullest extent, especially to understand demand. Most discovered that access to information is critical to success and many found their own ways to draw upon evidence and local knowledge. That insight empowered PCCs and those that harnessed local knowledge found it invaluable in exercising their duties and building their credibility as representatives of the people.

Nine lessons for the second generation

On 5 May, 40 candidates will be elected to serve as PCC – one less than in 2012 as Greater Manchester’s Mayor will assume PCC duties when elected in 2017. At least 13 of those will be new to the job, and those re-elected will be reinvigorated with a fresh mandate. Our analysis and interviews point to nine lessons from the last generation of PCCs to the next.

1. Get set for an engagement sprint

As the first PCCs found, making connections with the full range of their stakeholders was a priority after they took office. That meant conversations with senior police leaders, union officials, community groups, national bodies, local public sector agencies, media, other elected representatives and more. New PCCs can sprint through this initial engagement phase with a coherent stakeholder map and carefully structured plan that will help them meet the right people in the right order in the right settings – and quickly establish their presence.

2. Recognise your mandate

Newly-elected representatives can be discouraged by debates on their democratic legitimacy. PCCs need to accept that – like any other politician – they could enter office amid criticism from opponents and the media. But even if voter turnout is low or the winning margin is close, our electoral system means that the winning candidate has all the democratic authority they require. PCCs need to recognise this mandate as they set about their work.

3. Prepare for the evolution

The next four years will see substantial change in the public sector, not just within policing, but across local services. Devolution deals continue to be brokered which may see PCC responsibilities subsumed within mayoral arrangements. Councils outside the devo deals are changing shape and cutting back. Health and social care is integrating. Shared service arrangements are fast become the rule rather than the exception between public bodies. And PCCs are set to take fire and rescue services into their remit. All this change means that PCCs need to be at the centre of local, cross-sector discussions, and be prepared to recast their plans accordingly.

4. Make the case for digital

Digital has transformational potential for UK policing. Successful private enterprises – and increasing numbers of public bodies – are using digital technologies to maximise the time their workforces can spend on tasks that matter to their customers and the public. And they are rewiring their operations with predictive analytics, digital customer interactions, dynamic scheduling of field forces, mobile communications and remote access to information. The next term of office for PCCs will coincide with a digital revolution in the UK public services and police forces – arguably more than any other part of the public services – have much to gain if PCCs are willing to make the case for digital transformation.

5. Think wider than policing

Many first term PCCs found that demand for policing is often not caused by crime and they saw the interconnectivity of demand across the public services including mental health and youth services. PCCs are well-placed to improve connections between local agencies and have an underused power to convene groups for multi-lateral conversations. As elected officials, with deep roots in the community, they are also able to represent the citizen view of public services that goes beyond organisational silos.

6. Become master of your data

Some PCCs concluded that their forces did not exploit data to its potential – either within their administration or in deciding how resources should be deployed. Data can be a powerful resource for PCCs, both in understanding their communities’ priorities and in understanding how resources are used by their force – so next generation PCCs should take every opportunity to access and understand the data available to them.

7. Focus on implementation – especially with partners

The PCCs that we interviewed found that outcomes for the public were best achieved when the police worked with partners in the criminal justice system and the wider public, private and third sectors. They told us that partnership working used police resources better and helped all parties concentrate on what the public needed and wanted which is especially important as budgets continue to tighten. However, partnerships can become mired in policy detail rather than focused on implementation – so PCCs need to be clear on expectations for delivery.

8. Plan and manage political transition

This penultimate lesson is for PCC offices and police force leadership teams. While the first PCCs were forced to establish their own office, the next wave should benefit from the existing infrastructure even if they decide to make changes. That benefit will be realised if the offices, chief constables, and senior police leadership are prepared to support transition with a coherent induction plan to help new PCCs hit the ground running. As Whitehall knows, successful political transition requires pragmatic and mature planning to support incoming elected representatives – and it helps establish constructive relationships from the outset.

9. Support your local Police and Crime Commissioner

This final lesson is for national and local politicians in Westminster, Cardiff and throughout England and Wales. Many of the first PCCs felt that the government could have done more to promote them in 2012, which could have accelerated their credibility. This coming election has seen greater political mobilisation as the political parties seek to win PCC seats, and it provides an opportunity for politicians to support the next generation of PCCs by championing the role and offering them public support.

Conclusion

Establishing a new, democratically accountable role is a major challenge in any modern society – and the first generation of Police and Crime Commissioners (PCCs) have done just that for the second generation to build on. Our report finds that in 2012, PCCs faced a sharp initial challenge to establish their authority in the face of uncertainty and low voter turnouts. But when they did, many were able to engage the public and harness local knowledge in ways that allowed their forces to better reflect local priorities.

Our interviews and analysis point to a series of lessons for the new PCCs elected in May. They suggest that PCCs need to plan a rapid sprint of stakeholder engagement to make their presence felt swiftly, recognising their democratic mandate as their authority to operate. They need to accept the shifting sands of the policing landscape and play a role in shaping it for the future, while being sure to connect with agencies across the wider sector. They need to champion the use of digital technologies and harness the power of data in decision-making. And they need to make sure partnerships are focused on delivering better outcomes for citizens.

For the teams closest to PCCs – both their own offices and their force’s senior leadership – our report suggests that they should invest time in political transition plans. A smooth transition can help PCCs get up and running as quickly and effectively as possible and start crucial relationships on the right footing.

For political parties and other elected representatives – both local and national – our interviews suggest that they should support PCCs by helping raise their profile so that the public better understands their crucial role in policing and public life.

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Designed and produced by The Creative Studio at Deloitte, London. J5950