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Tel: 01273 623222
Fax: 01273 625526
Email: info@pavpub.com
Web: www.pavpub.com

Editors: John Pitts and Chris Fox

Tel: 020 8679 4552
Email:
john.pitts4@btopenworld.com

All contributions to *Community Safety Journal* are welcome. Please send your article to the Editor or call on the number above if you would like to discuss your ideas.

Please send your article to:
John Pitts
Co-Editor
Community Safety Journal
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Contents

Editorial	<i>John Pitts and Chris Fox</i>2
Opinion	In search of a profession <i>Simon Harding</i>4
Policy	Averting ghettoisation: the role of educational services in reducing crime and victimisation in the ethnic minority community in Anderlecht, Brussels <i>John Pitts and David Porteous</i>7
	Hands on or hands off? Central government's role in managing CDRPs <i>Mike Hough</i>14
Research	Responding to anti-social behaviour: reconciling top-down imperatives with bottom-up emotions <i>Kathryn Farrow and David Prior</i>20
	Responding to the unequal distribution of crime <i>Lucy Stone</i>29
	Housing drug and alcohol users <i>Michelle Duffin</i>37
Practice	Involving the community in crime and disorder reduction <i>Sarah Morton</i>39
Reviews	Book reviews45

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In search of a profession

ABSTRACT

Simon Harding shares his opinions on the development and future of the community safety profession.

Simon Harding

Assistant Director for Community Safety and Crime Reduction, Lambeth

'There's no-one decent out there and all the good ones are already in jobs.'

That's what you'll hear when you tell colleagues you are beginning a round of community safety recruitment. The field of candidates seems to be filled not with experienced professionals, but with wannabees with two years' experience in administration, seeking a highly paid challenging post in crime reduction. Whilst this is an overly simplistic and pessimistic view, it reveals a truth that poses a real challenge to the 'profession' of community safety.

Where then, do they come from – those people waiting to join us in the frantic world of community safety? The answer is from a range of disciplines: research, criminal justice, probation, regeneration, youth offending, planning, housing and so forth. I've always thought that such diversity offers the profession a rich and varied seam of expertise, providing a great opportunity for disciplines to merge, each adding its own unique perspective on crime reduction. As community safety impinges upon so many other disciplines, it is only right that people in these various disciplines find a career as community safety practitioners and add their own practitioner perspectives and experience into a diverse and potent mix.

This can also, however, mean that some staff have a skill set which is narrowly defined in a single core discipline. It may take many years before such a single discipline specialist develops wider experience across the whole community safety spectrum, as is presently required of community safety practitioners.

Community safety and crime reduction is a world apart from where it was 10 or 12 years ago when few authorities retained community safety teams or even had it on their radar. If they did it was usually staffed by a lonely figure fighting desperately to get their item on the agenda and a slice of the 'funding cake'.

Community safety practitioners must now juggle a wide range of skills from managing large teams (I retain almost 50 staff) and large budgets of several million pounds. Partnerships themselves are now hugely complicated with a crowded landscape of local area agreements, local strategic partnerships, a plethora of government funding streams and a never-ending series of initiatives – local, regional and national. One must be a gifted manager, arch politician, community friend, accountant, marketer, strategic planner, crime analyst, negotiator, policy-maker and media-savvy public speaker; all at the same time.

Sadly in community safety, such wide-ranging skills are not easy to locate. New staff often have a key skill but not a wide range of skills. Staff who have been in post a while often search in vain for suitable training to take them to the next level. Some of the solid old school practitioners (who maintained a well grounded set of skills of project delivery, evaluation and community involvement) now struggle to cope with the huge corporate agenda and grinding drudgery of the world of performance indicators (PIs). Some practitioners struggle to keep up whilst others burn out and leave the field. Yet many new arrivals appear to fly on flumes with very little real evidence of ever having delivered anything, only to pond-skip from one post to another, all too often being elevated above both their ability and experience. One neighbourhood renewal advisor I spoke to recently certainly agreed with this gloomy diagnosis, recognising that she is often brought in by local authorities to pick up the pieces of just such a scenario.

The community safety 'profession' is now dominated by a huge and barely manageable agenda. And our task is further complicated by rapid staff churn and an old guard of seasoned professionals who have either been sidelined in the corporate race or are experiencing professional burn-out. On the other hand, we have a rising collection of 'arrivistes' who seem to be barely more than general administrators with little, if any, experience in the field or in the disciplines relevant to community safety. This shows itself in a real skills gap, which has desperate HR consultants apparently putting forward for interview any candidate who's community safety experience often amounts to no more than watching a few episodes of *The Bill*.

Many of us who have 20 or more years' experience in this profession now have a feeling of a lowering of the professional standard. Of course I use the term 'professional standards' almost euphemistically, and the term 'community safety profession' more in hope than expectation. We have yet to be granted professional status by either the government or ourselves.

This failure to professionalise community safety is, I believe, now leading to a deterioration of standards, which can only damage our nascent and vulnerable profession. This deterioration is occurring at both local and national government level.

At central government level this lack of 'professionalisation' is demonstrated in our failure to defend a rational model of community safety as the agenda is simultaneously amended, appended and upended by generic civil servants seeking only to demonstrate the success of politically derived 'outcomes'. The true value of community safety, and of those who dedicate themselves to working in it as a profession, is therefore diminished. In the absence of this 'professionalisation' we lack a professional voice with which to articulate our views about the future direction of community safety. Generic civil servants thus run roughshod over the long held values of community safety practitioners. Thus, for example, the review of the Crime and Disorder Act now proposes passing many of the powers of the crime and disorder reduction partnerships (CDRPs) to the local strategic partnership (LSP). Items of policy and direction are largely dictated to us. Professional practitioners in community safety are not apparently listened to or heard, let alone valued.

As a member of the Chartered Institute of Housing and the Chartered Institute of Marketing I can see just how these professional member organisations play a vital role in maintaining the ethos of their professions. They set minimum standards for entering the profession; they regulate progression through the profession by grading membership on the basis of practitioner skill and experience; they provide guidance, training and offer qualifications. They help set the national agenda, articulate and advocate on behalf of members. They raise the profile of the profession and allow it to designate chartered status. They chart the direction of the profession often raising it to an internationally recognised position, possibly also with royal

assignment. Such professional organisations also ensure that members operate through a strict code of professional conduct designed and managed to retain high standards of professionalism. In addition they offer members the benefit of libraries, research opportunities and the corralling and collating of learning and knowledge.

All of this is yet to come for community safety as a profession. Some time back there was the flaccid promise of National Occupational Standards and an NVQ. This is only a small part of the picture and it's not enough. Some universities have begun offering diplomas and even the odd MA in community safety. Whilst they may be in the vanguard of taking forward the profession in terms of offering new learning and qualifications we still seem to be missing a fully-fledged acknowledgement of our professional status.

So where then are the advocates for this new profession? I raised this point with John Denham when he was minister with responsibility for community safety

and policing. His response was to say '*It's the communities who are the professionals in this game*'. Whilst I understand his implicit call for communities to be recognised as a partner, he nonetheless undervalues the professional contribution and experience brought to the task everyday by those of us who work in community safety in all its many guises.

I do believe strongly in community safety as a significant part of the criminal justice picture. I also believe that it's time for us to raise the game for community safety and begin to recognise and evidence the contribution we make. If we don't, then the generic civil servants will annul CDRPs and dilute the agenda until it is unrecognisable. Let us, as professionals demand to be recognised for what we contribute. Let us have that professionalism cemented in professional status so we can at last begin to talk to the Home Office on an equal footing. Perhaps then we can develop our own true voice and begin to chart our own future.

Until then, I'll get back to my recruitment strategy. I've got some pond-skippers to sift out!

The editors welcome feedback on the articles in *Community Safety Journal*. Please submit your comments to John Pitts, *Co-Editor* at john.pitts4@btopenworld.com or Chris Fox, *Co-Editor* at chris.fox@matrixrcl.co.uk.