


# Chapter 13

## Innovation in Policing

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### ABSTRACT

*Innovation in organisations is the coordinated and concerted practice of conceiving, developing and implementation new products and services to benefit both customers and the organisation itself. Innovation thus requires new ways of thinking, communicating, and acting, an openness to potential failure, and flexibility in structures, processes, and resourcing. This chapter examines the nature of innovation in policing, including the relationship between innovative practice and PEEL outcomes. Before progressing to examine cultural, situational and organisational factors which may influence the innovation capability and capacity of a policing organisation as a precursor to providing police leaders with advice to catalyse innovation within their force. The chapter closes with a case study from a UK police force recognised for its innovative practice in the most recent series of PEEL inspections, demonstrating the potential of novel approaches to police business.*

### INTRODUCTION

Innovation in organisations is the coordinated and concerted practice of conceiving, developing and implementing new products and services to benefit both customers and the organisation itself. Innovation thus requires new ways of thinking, communicating, and acting, an openness to potential failure, and flexibility in structures, processes, and resourcing. In addition to embracing principles of continuous organisational learning. In contrast, organisational systems are often subconsciously orientated toward maintaining the status quo. This chapter provides an exploration of innovation within law enforcement, drawing upon an analysis of

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PEEL inspection outcomes to emphasise the role of innovative practice in achieving outstanding policing performance. Before progressing to examine barriers to, and enablers of, innovation in law enforcement and the role of leaders in fostering an innovation culture in which new ideas flourish.

## DEFINING INNOVATION IN POLICING

Multiple definitions of innovation exist across various business sectors, each representing the types of innovation and contexts unique to that environment. Given the particular circumstances in which police forces operate and the need for conceptual clarity at the outset of this chapter, it is necessary to define what is meant by innovation in policing in the mid-to-late 2020s. Using Varadarajan's (2024) framework we therefore propose the following definition:

*Innovation in policing is the conception, development, implementation and evaluation of novel approaches to police business, resulting in the creation of value for stakeholders.*

This definition therefore comprises five specific elements:

- The need for a novel concept (product, process or practice) which differs to those previously developed within or outside of the policing body.
- The requirement for the continued development, testing and refinement of the novel concept based upon iterative feedback and evaluation.
- The focus upon policing business as unique to this sector, but which may capture the broad swathe of activities involved in the operation of a modern police force.
- The derivation of value, whether tangible or intangible.
- Which is to the benefit of internal and/or external stakeholders such as police personnel, partner agencies, the public, or HM Government.

Innovation is commonly conceived to involve the development of a new technological product, such as an app or device, yet it has the potential to be so much more. Particularly in a multi-dimensional context such as policing where there exists the opportunity to innovate across numerous areas such as the types of service provided, processes and ways of working, preventative and investigative activity, the rationalisation of administration and bureaucracy, internal and external communications, and the use of data to inform decision making. This is recognised in PEEL inspections.

## WHAT DOES PEEL SAY ABOUT INNOVATION?

Innovation is not scored in its own right in PEEL inspections and thus there are no set criteria for forces to attain. Instead, innovation is recognised as individual case studies within PEEL reports aligned to the individual inspection areas. In preparing this chapter the author conducted a review of the 2023-2025 PEEL inspections conducted at the time of writing<sup>1</sup> with a view to identifying any pattern in the types of innovation featured in inspection reports and potential relationships between innovative practice and inspection outcomes. In doing so it was ascertained that there is no clear relationship between the recognition of innovation within a PEEL inspection and the overall outcomes for the force. However, a weak relationship was identified between the number of innovation case studies featured in a report and the extent to which that force achieved gradings of GOOD or above. This is perhaps to be expected given the wealth of research which points to the positive association between flourishing innovation within an organisation upon areas such as performance (Oumlil, Faouzi and Juiz, 2020).

Clearer trends were apparent in terms of the areas in which forces were conducting innovation with a substantial number of the included case studies relating to the area of *preventing and deterring crime and antisocial behaviour and reducing vulnerability*. The second most common domain of innovation being *building, supporting and protecting the workforce*, with lower but still notable recognition of innovation in the fields of:

- *Leadership and force management*
- *Protecting vulnerable people*
- *Responding to the public*
- *Police powers and treating the public fairly and respectfully.*

Notably the least innovation was seen in the fields of *Investigating crime and Managing offenders and suspects*, both of which are areas of significant regulation, high demand, and substantial multi-agency engagement. Which, as we shall see in the next section, may serve to impede the potential for innovation.

## BARRIERS TO AND ENABLERS OF INNOVATION

Research into innovation thwarting factors identifies bureaucracy, financial constraints, change resistance and the absence of time as key influences. In contrast, key enablers include collaboration, culture, education, knowledge, leadership, structure, strategy, and diversity (Johnsson, 2017). Yet it is important to recognise

that these factors do not exist in isolation and may be mutually influential, and that innovation catalysts and inhibitors may be specific to individual organisations, teams, or employees. Thus, here we will deal with the major influences upon innovation capability which may be experienced in policing.

The nature of police, organisational and occupational culture has been substantially debated for decades across professional and academic publications. Particular facets of which may have an inhibiting or enabling influence upon organisational innovation. For example, a strong in-group mentality and suspicion of outsiders may serve to limit receptivity to new ideas from other teams, organisations or sectors, and increase resistance to collaborative working (Loftus, 2009), which is itself an innovation enabler (Johnsson, 2017). Further, police culture is inherently competitive (Buhrig, 2024), which, when coupled with suspicion of outsiders, may exacerbate siloed working and impede the exchange of ideas and knowledge with each party seeking to retain sole credit. Elsewhere, resistance to change identified in multiple policing commentaries (Skogan, 2008; Duxbury et al., 2017) may prevent new ideas being conceived, hinder their development and or act to thwart their wider proliferation. Though this phenomenon may potentially be limited through engaging practitioners in innovation from the outset, including giving life to their ideas such that they have a vested interest in the particular change progressing.

Innovation in policing may further be impeded by risk averse culture manifesting in heightened bureaucracy relating to resource allocation and the need for rapid evidence of success. This aversion, stemming from intense internal and external scrutiny of policing organisations, including a fear of individual and/or collective reputational damage. In this vein, PEEL itself and the desire to perform well in force management and leadership may impede innovation. The fear of failure and criticism resulting in an unwillingness to allocate scarce resource to untested initiatives. Whilst at an individual employee level, the need to demonstrate success to achieve promotion criteria in a hierarchical and competitive environment may impede willingness to take the risk of innovation.

Yet whilst this section has so far interpreted police culture as a negative for innovation. There are aspects which may catalyse novel forms of working, including an action orientation and pragmatic outlook which facilitate creative approaches to solving problems, particularly at the operational level (Reiner, 2010). Likewise intra-team solidarity may be associated with the psychological safety to experiment and share ideas.

From a leadership perspective, an innovation strategy, vision and values are integral to establishing clear direction for the innovation effort and demonstrating a commitment to innovation principles (Pisano, 2018), provided that these are subsequently reflected in decisions and actions. Whilst leaders also play a key role in establishing and maintaining innovation culture as facilitative or thwarting

and possess the power and authority to allocate or withhold many of the resources necessary for innovation to thrive. Yet a review of the force strategies conducted in the course of writing this chapter identified innovation as an expressed priority for a negligible number of forces. Painting a picture of a lack of leader interest in novel means of organisational development, despite the potential for innovation to assist in the achievement of other police strategic objectives, such as increasing public trust and reducing vulnerability.

Even where innovation supportive strategic intent exists, the nature of police leadership may suppress innovation, particularly where strict adherence to notions of hierarchy endures. For example, new ideas conceived at the operational level will typically be fed up through the hierarchy for authorisation, risking their distortion, blockage or simply being lost in a miasma of police business. Despite the best efforts of all those involved. Whilst hierarchy may also induce a reluctance to give honest upward feedback (Riegel, 2022). Leader approach is also associated with the attainment of innovation potential. Requiring an open, authentic, transparent approach which encourages autonomy and individual development within a supportive environment (Alblooshi, Shamsuzzaman, and Haridy, 2021). In contrast, authoritarian, transactional and micromanagement approaches will likely inhibit innovation via a detrimental impact upon motivation and organisational commitment, amongst other factors.

More practically, bureaucracy is an anathema to innovation through its impact upon slowing processes down considerably or even bringing them to a complete stop through the existence of layers of red tape which impede flexible experimentation and result in a loss of project momentum (Turner, 2018). Whilst a degree of governance is necessary in a publicly funded police organisation, the proliferation of bureaucracy in modern forces is immense (Sweetland, 2024) and the extent to which it is actually serving to assist with risk management is debatable. Bureaucracy may also serve to limit the viability of collaborations and/or the availability of resource for innovative initiatives. Resourcing being a further key determinant of an organisation's innovation potential (Kedia, 2016). To be creative, individuals and teams need time and space to come up with, discuss, and adjust ideas, alongside physical and financial resources to develop ideas. Yet, a substantial number of police employees are working at or above capacity. Resulting in a detrimental impact upon well-being (Oscar Kilo, 2023) and thus likely limiting their ability to be creative (Lim, Williams and Bullock, 2023). In other words, police employees are simply too exhausted to innovate. Which, when coupled with low morale and motivation in many quarters (Police Federation, 2024), further undermines law enforcement's innovation potential. The financial picture is similarly challenging, with many forces still required to make substantial savings despite increased government funding for the service overall (Wiggett, 2025). In this climate, allocating money and/or peo-

ple to innovation initiatives where success is not guaranteed likely appears a risky prospect for police leaders.

From a human resource angle teams and organisations which excel in innovating are typically those where there is a broad range of backgrounds, skills, knowledge, and experience, and where everyone's perspective is valued (Hewlett, Marshall and Sherbin, 2013). This requires not only a commitment to recruiting a diverse employee group, but to also ensuring the equitable availability and time for all to engage in continual learning. Alongside a willingness to engage with insight drawn from outside the law enforcement sector (West and Bogers, 2013). Further, innovative teams require more than the presence of subject matter experts. Research has shown that the most successfully innovative teams are those which marry specialist knowledge with a willingness to collaborate, open mindedness to new ideas, an action focus, understanding of the internal and external environment, and a degree of tenacity (Johnsson, 2017b). Thus, the development of innovative team requires a considered approach to talent management not just at the recruitment and promotion stage, but in the crafting of team composition.

Furthermore, in respect of governance, public sector organisations, including policing, face considerable pressure to deliver innovative service transformation, yet are unable to exert radical change due to stasis in internal and external governance. For example, the strategic direction of forces is considerably influenced by and accountable to local and national political representatives, which may act as a brake in terms of endorsing necessary investment in technological infrastructure, and/or require prioritisation of politically motivated initiatives over and above innovation projects. Further, inflexible governance of areas such as procurement may impede the experimentation and collaboration necessary for innovative development through emphasising cost as the most influential determinant as opposed to wider determinants of value. Whilst the complex multi-agency policing environment, with considerable interdependencies may impede innovation where partners are either unwilling and/or unable to collaborate in open innovation projects.

Likewise, the wider operational context of policing may also serve to limit innovation. Policing is inherently reactive in nature, requiring responses to emerging threat and risk. But also, culturally reactive by way of a short-term focus on solving immediate problems, which acts as a barrier to more strategic, innovative development and maintains focus upon previous and present challenges. This is particularly the case where resources are limited and thus necessarily focused upon firefighting in the present rather than preparing for the future.

Finally, innovation in policing may be impeded by the extensive range of innovative technologies and practices available, presenting challenges with identifying the most effective option for the particular force context. A further complication in this respect stemming from public sector procurement rules which place a significant

weighting upon cost. Further, whilst police-higher education collaborations present significant opportunities for both parties in furthering innovative practices, these too may be limited by bureaucracy on both sides. Whilst innovations proposed by groups external to policing face the additional barrier of lacking understanding of operational reality, thereby emphasising the necessity of collaboration and knowledge sharing in innovation development.

Limitations upon innovation in policing are therefore organisationally and culturally derived, with many of them being deeply entrenched in practice, norms and values which have perpetuated for a considerable period of time. However, history has also shown that innovation may prosper in policing, and the establishment of an innovation culture is one means by which this may be achieved.

## **FOSTERING AN INNOVATION CULTURE**

An innovation culture is an organisational environment in which creative thinking is encouraged by organisational leadership, processes and practices such that everyone in the organisation is empowered to innovate to the benefit of the organisation and its stakeholders. A positive innovation culture promotes communication within and between organisations, including the sharing of knowledge, experiences and ideas, enabling progression and learning. A positive innovation culture further serves to embed and perpetuate the values which catalyse innovation, including a learning mindset, tolerance of failure and willingness to take risks. Thus, enabling organisations to progress and avoid stasis (Li and Lui, 2022). Whilst from a workforce perspective, a positive innovation culture is one in which employees perceive greater autonomy in their roles and experience competency through skills development and learning. Together, these factors having a positive influence upon motivation and organisational commitment.

For leaders seeking to develop and nurture an innovation culture within their forces we therefore offer the following practical advice.

- i. *Establish a collective strategic vision for innovation* and embed this into the force strategy and values. Doing so requires consultation across the hierarchy and business areas to understand others' perceptions and needs when it comes to innovation, building a coalition of support for the resultant strategic objectives. In addition to the development of an associated implementation plan with specific measurable objectives each assigned to a named owner with a defined timeline for delivery. This step also requires the active demonstration of the vision, values and strategy in the actions and decisions of leadership, including addressing and

- amending contradictory existing policy and procedure, and setting an example as to the nature of innovation supportive leadership the organisation aspires to.
- ii. *Promote communication.* A thriving innovation culture is fuelled by transparent two-way communication across and between all levels of the organisation which enables the sharing of knowledge, facilitates access to resources, and enables the actioning of ideas. Such communication can be a particular challenge in hierarchical semi-disciplined contexts such as policing and therefore requires leaders to actively and demonstrably nurture its achievement. Including through acting on feedback received, providing constructive feedback to others, and making greater use of open engagement sessions with senior leaders where attendees have both the option to submit anonymous questions in advance and spontaneous questions during the event. In addition to supporting employees with developing active listening skills and seeking feedback from across the force as to the most effective communication channels for developing engagement.
  - iii. *Promote collaboration.* Coupled with accelerating communication is the requirement to enhance collaboration within and across teams, and with organisations outside of the individual force. This requires cultivating a mindset in which external insight is regarded as enhancing rather than replacing internal capabilities and challenging the 'us and them' mindset often seen in policing organisations. In practice emphasising the benefits of partnership working for all involved may assist with achieving this, including encouraging those involved in collaborative projects to speak out about their experiences and learning, and emphasising the wider benefit to the force in terms of effective resource management, and the alignment between the strategic objectives of the participating bodies. Whilst also ensuring the collaborative initiatives are led by relationship focused individuals with a clear terms of reference for the overall project and the respective participants.
  - iv. *Recognise and reward learning.* Characteristics of a learning organisation include a culture of continuous collaborative learning in which employees share experiences, cohesive systems exist to facilitate knowledge sharing, learning is integrated into daily operations, and leaders champion learning through communications, decisions and role-modelling behaviours (Senge, 1990). However, policing operational debriefs and commendation processes are invariably focused upon outcomes and the successes achieved. With much less value placed on the learning which can be built upon for the future. Particularly in cases where the operation/initiative did not deliver the initial objectives. Developing an innovation culture requires demonstrable recognition and reward of learning in spite of the outcome. This could take the form of flipping debrief and appraisal formats to consider learning ahead of successes. Alongside introduction of reflective questions into promotion processes to encourage applicants to focus on what they

gained by way of knowledge and how this can be applied in the future, rather than simply what was achieved. And giving consideration as to how learning may be recognised and rewarded in official commendation processes.

- v. *Look outside of the immediate force, or even policing, for inspiration and encourage others to do the same.* The potential sources of ideation are endless, and it pays to take the time to explore these including reflecting on how they could be adapted to the specific force concept. Key examples may include the Office of the Police Chief Scientific Adviser, Police Digital Service, conferences, police research partnerships, or the Research Map and ‘What Works’ repositories managed by the College of Policing. Innovation does not have to entail coming up with a brand-new technology, process or policy. It may lie in applying a concept from outside policing in a novel way to the context of a particular force or using tooling in new ways. Keeping abreast of emerging ideas is potentially time consuming but identifying and subscribing to the social media feeds of innovation thought leaders, business publications, and research organisations can reduce some of the demand. Whilst sharing these with others within your force will not only catalyse discussion on innovation, but it will also be a clear demonstration of your commitment to the organisational innovation vision, strategy and values as a senior leader.
- vi. *Enabling autonomy.* Individuals who feel empowered to make decisions in their role, including in the ways in which tasks are fulfilled, and in the management of their working lives show a greater propensity toward innovative behaviour. Achieving autonomy in this manner requires leaders to avoid the temptation to micromanage and to trust in their employees’ expertise, whilst also being sufficiently present to set objectives, offer support, feedback and unblock barriers. It may also incorporate allowing greater flexibility in working arrangements and encouraging individuals to take control of their professional development through the setting of individual appraisal objectives in addition to, or instead of, those prescribed by their role or the force.
- vii. *Embrace experimentation.* In addition to recognising learning and giving employees the autonomy to experiment, it is essential to energise experimentation through emphasising its role in creating data on which subsequent improvements and decisions may be made. This may include running small experiments in a contained (sandbox) environment to explore initial viability prior to a decision upon wider roll out to test the initial assumptions on which the idea was predicated. Thus, increasing confidence in investing further and ensuring that the future development is grounded in evidence. However, the need for an objective analysis of resulting data is also pivotal to prevent limit bias in the decision-making process.

- viii. *Enhance psychological safety.* Experimentation will only happen if the participants feel psychologically safe in doing so. The fear of being judged in the event of failure can have a powerful effect on an individual's decision to try, particularly in a hierarchical and competitive culture such as policing. In this vein, leaders may cultivate psychological safety through promoting compassionate, empathetic and authentic communication, demonstrating this in their own engagement with others and not being afraid to appear vulnerable or humble. In addition to establishing clear norms for how problems, mistakes or failure are handled (which incorporate an emphasis on learning) to reduce uncertainty induced anxiety and assure individuals that they will be supported by the organisation.
- ix. *Ensure innovation is resourced.* Through resource management strategies which place value on time, financial and other resource expenditure on new initiatives. This has the potential to be challenging in a public sector climate where resources are limited. However, strategic recognition of the necessity of innovation to deliver long term sustainability of the organisation may go some way to alleviate concerns, particularly where strategic messaging places value on innovations which enable greater efficiency in resource use. Whilst embedding innovation as a core competency within individual role appraisals may assist with enhancing recognition of its place as an essential skill to be developed and nurtured by employees.
- x. *Foster diversity of perspective.* Finally, innovation requires a diversity of thought, experience and skills, which may be facilitated through talent management, recruitment, and training. But also giving consideration to greater flexibility of employment structures such as the use of secondments into and out of the organisation or teams to promote the proliferation of new perspectives.

Leadership plays a key role in shaping the (innovation) culture of an organisation through their ability to establish strategy, allocate resource and influence the behaviour of employees. Thus, a concerted innovation strategy which is consistently supported by the actions and decisions of an organisation's leaders has the potential to go a long way toward energising creativity, experiment and continuous organisational learning to the benefit of all involved.

## CASE STUDIES

Key enablers of innovation within police forces are therefore derived from the culture, leadership, and context in which it operates. The following case studies

illustrate some of the wide range of innovative practices in UK policing today, as enabled by the concepts discussed in this chapter.

Cambridgeshire Constabulary demonstrate innovation in both practice and technology in addressing contemporary policing challenges (HMICFRS, 2024). For example, the Force uses technology to enable effective scrutiny of the use of stop and search powers through community participation. When an individual is subject to a stop and search, they are provided with a QR code to enable access to information explaining the associated process and powers. In addition to an invitation to participate in the community scrutiny panel who are responsible for reviewing the use of stop and search and providing feedback to the force. Thereby seeking to facilitate the establishment of a panel representative of the community and enhancing the relationship between the Force and local populace.

Other forces have also adopted innovative approaches to engaging with local communities. For example, Gloucester Constabulary (HMICFRS, 2024b) engaged a well-known social media influencer in hosting a podcast, during their campaign to raise awareness of stalking. Thereby widening the scope of the potential audience for the initiative beyond those who typically interact with law enforcement social media. Likewise, as part of the response to the Police Race Action Plan, West Midlands Police have worked with social media influencers in developing their understanding of perceptions of policing amongst young members of the Black community. Including through the use of videos and engagement events which enabled feedback that was subsequently used to inform officer training (HMICFRS, 2023). These examples demonstrating the ability of forces to think differently about community engagement and experiment with new ways of working.

Elsewhere forces are innovating in the use of data analytics in more effective management of threat, risk and resources. West Midlands Police, for example, have used data analytics to develop a tool to predict likely locations of knife crime (HMICFRS, 2023), enabling the introduction of mitigating measures to minimise risk. Whilst multiple forces are demonstrating innovativeness in workforce management, including in the fields of recruitment, wellbeing and retention. For example, Hertfordshire Police (HMICFRS, 2024c) have recruited data scientists via a collaboration with a local university, recruitment provider and social media platform to enable greater exploitation of performance data. The programme including opportunities for internships within teams involved in the strategic development of the policing response. Allowing the Force the deeper insight, skills and diverse perspectives provided by the graduates, some of whom may go on to longer term careers within the organisation. In relation to wellbeing, Merseyside Police are working with higher education to explore the benefits of wearable technology in empowering employees to manage their health and assist with developing more bespoke solutions to wellbeing needs (Cox et al., 2024; LJMU, 2025). Whilst finally, Greater Manchester

Police have introduced a Stay Team, to explore the causes of voluntary resignation within the force and work with individuals considering leaving to understand and address barriers to their remaining (HMICFRS, 2023b). Collectively these examples demonstrating the value of collaboration in fostering innovation whether within a force, or between policing and other organisations. As enabled by through strategic vision, resourcing and a culture which emphasises continual learning.

## CONCLUSION

Innovation in tooling, process and policy is increasingly essential to delivering effective, efficient and sustainable policing organisations for the future. And whilst innovation is not a key direct determinant of outstanding performance in PEEL, it is almost certain that innovative initiatives across the PEEL domains are demonstrative of a well-run, effective, and efficiently functioning force. For example, innovation thrives in a climate of effective *leadership and management*, where *employees are supported*, two of the key PEEL dimensions. Whilst in turn, innovation will enable a force to be more successful in delivering upon the other domains such as *investigating crime*, *managing offenders*, and *protecting vulnerable people*, amongst others.

Yet, as this chapter has shown, many of the practices, cultural norms, policies and processes in modern day policing have the potential to suffocate innovation at the outset. Thus, placing a responsibility upon leaders to address these aspects through a clear vision, strategy and values which empower employee innovation within a collaborative, flexible, and supportive environment which rewards learning and facilitates the expression of diverse perspectives. This will not be easy, but is achievable when consistently, transparently, and authentically aspired toward as part of a holistic approach to sustainable organisational learning and development.

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## ENDNOTE

<sup>1</sup> February 2025

