



'The influence that politicians, community leaders and the media have on confidence in the police in Northern Ireland'

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**Northern Ireland Policing Board:
Confidence in policing Research**

'The influence that politicians, community leaders and the media have on confidence in the police in Northern Ireland'

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1.0 Introduction

In January 2014, the Northern Ireland Policing Board (NIPB) commissioned the University of Ulster to conduct research into public confidence in policing to help inform the work of the Board and its oversight of police service delivery. More specifically, the research team were tasked with exploring ‘the influence that politicians, community leaders and the media have on public confidence in policing in Northern Ireland’. To date, the subject of ‘confidence in policing’ within a Northern Ireland context has been relatively under researched, both in academic and policy terms. Thus, the present research is the first empirical research to be produced in Northern Ireland which considers the issue of confidence in policing from the perspective of community leaders, politicians and the media – including the key influences and dynamics which underpin police confidence at a community level.

The report begins with a comprehensive review of academic literature, policy documents and contemporary events related to confidence in policing. The research then provides an overview of the methodology used to undertake the research, with the remainder of the report comprised of the findings from the discussions with representatives from the media, political parties and the community and voluntary sector who participated. The report concludes with an overview of the central findings along with a series of recommendations.

2.0 Literature review

The influence of politicians, community leaders and media on public confidence in the Police Service of Northern Ireland (PSNI) brings together several important and interlocking research fields. However, in spite of the central role occupied by politicians and community leaders as part of wider political progress in the country; and the well-rehearsed impact of the mass media on public opinion related to crime and policing within the criminological literature, the present research is the first of its kind to empirically assess such dynamics within a Northern Ireland context. Added to this, the more general drivers of public confidence in the PSNI remain under-explored, notwithstanding the extensive international literature and research strategies emerging elsewhere in Britain and the USA. Therefore, given this paucity of empirical work, the current review may be imagined as more exploratory than definitive, drawing on material from local and international research, which considers related issues.

The review has been developed across five key sections. The first offers a brief explanation of what is meant by confidence in policing, distinguishing it from issues of trust and legitimacy. The second section describes the current levels of confidence in the PSNI, with particular reference to England and Wales and the Republic of Ireland. The final three sections then consider the role of politicians, community leaders and the media respectively, reflecting upon how the literature suggests they might influence public confidence in the PSNI.

2.1. Defining 'Confidence' in Policing

Within the literature a particular effort has been made to distinguish confidence from 'trust' and 'legitimacy' in police organisations. This distinction is useful in terms of understanding the level at which politicians, local community leaders and the media may be influencing public confidence in the police, as shall be examined. In their authoritative review of the trust and confidence policing literature in Britain, Bradford *et al.* (2008:2) define confidence as "a system-level institutionally-based attitude towards the activities of the criminal justice system. It is, we propose, something closer to a job-rating of the police and other agents of criminal justice". Police confidence, then, is focused around *beliefs* or *attitudes*, which themselves are based on basic social understandings and assumptions, focused on the *police as an institution* (Bradford *et al.*, 2008).

Confidence in the police can then firstly be distinguished from *trust in the police*. As discussed by Bradford *et al.* (2008) and Bradford & Jackson (2011), trust is deeply rooted in our lived and experiential relationships with others; and involves our expectations of how other people will behave, in particular the predictability of their actions, fostering stability and coherency. In terms of

confidence in police organisations, this would suggest that public trust in the police is born out of the specific dynamics of encounters with the police:

“where the individual is an actor, where they are actively involved in interactions with authorities and can make their own assessments of, for example the fairness of police officer’s behaviour” (Bradford *et al.*, 2008:2).

The motives of the police are thought to be of particular importance in the context of the trust relationship between the public and the police, centred around the estimates of character and affect, and that the police have the best interests of the public at heart (Bradford *et al.*, 2008; Tyler & Huo, 2002). That said, any conception of trust which relies purely on face-to-face interactions cannot do justice to the complexity of the public’s relationships with the police and other criminal justice agencies, especially where relatively few people are regularly placed in a situation to make such judgments about individual officers, yet are still prepared to trust the police more broadly (Bradford & Jackson, 2009). In this regard, the literature would suggest that trust will “always be complemented by and formed in the light of assessments of other aspects of police behaviour...” such as fairness, effectiveness, shared values and a commitment to the local community (Bradford *et al.*, 2008).

Confidence in police organisations can also be distinguished from *legitimacy as a property possessed by the police*, when citizens feel that the police are right, proper and just and ought to be voluntarily deferred to (Tyler, 2006). This empirical understanding of legitimacy, as opposed to philosophical, sees the legitimacy of the police as a ‘social fact’ expressed in the actions and motivations of individuals which is capable of being observed and recorded by researchers (Bradford & Jackson, 2011). Central to legitimacy is the psychological perspective which captures a normative dimension to an individual’s behaviour which include: motivation to act where compliance is based on a positive and intentional belief about the right of the police to power and influence; and internalization of the value that is considered morally just to obey (Tyler & Jackson, 2013). Legitimacy, then, is “typically framed as a value that leads the person holding it to feel a responsibility and obligation to defer to the law and the decisions of legal authorities” (Tyler & Jackson, 2013:88). In practical terms, this may be observed in terms of specific acts of deference, compliance or cooperation from members of the public which may involve simply calling the police when a crime has occurred or assisting them with their inquiries (Bradford & Jackson, 2011).

In summary, *trust* is then primarily, but not exclusively, about the relationship that exists between members of the public and individual officers. But *confidence* is the public’s perception of the police based on a broader and more

remote assessment of the process and activities of the police (Bradford *et al.*, 2008:2). Whilst this distinction has been made in the literature, there is of course the danger of over-conceptualizing what is really happening ‘on the ground’ when the public make assessments of the police, whether it be on the side of the road or watching the television. Compared with legitimacy, confidence in policing is perhaps less closely linked to the justification of police power and authority, and taps into the themes of legitimacy, such as the moral alignment with the police and a willingness to obey and cooperate with police officers (Tyler & Fagan, 2008; Jackson & Bradford, 2010). Such distinctions between trust and confidence are therefore particularly salient when considering the potential influence of politicians, local community leaders and the media in relation to confidence in police organisations – which may include for example, the organisational image of the PSNI, or how citizens come to approach and understand the interactions they may have with police officers.

2.2 Levels of Confidence in Policing

Turning to Northern Ireland specifically, there are two official surveys used to measure confidence in the PSNI and policing institutions. The first is the Department of Justice’s (DoJ) survey on *Perceptions of Policing, Justice and Anti-Social Behaviour*. This draws upon data taken from the Northern Ireland Crime Survey – a representative, personal interview survey of the perceptions of crime of approximately 4,000 adults living in private households across the country (DOJ, 2014). The second is the Northern Ireland Policing Board’s (NIPB) *Public Perceptions of the Police, PCSPs and the Northern Ireland Policing Board*. The NIPB draws upon their Northern Ireland Omnibus Survey results to assess the levels of public satisfaction with PSNI performance, Policing and Community Safety Partnerships (PCSPs), and the NIPB itself (NIPB, 2013). The Omnibus Survey consists of a random sample of 1,154 people aged 16 or over, drawn from private addresses.

At a general level public confidence in the PSNI has gradually increased since the organisation was formed in 2001 (Nolan, 2013 66). The DoJ survey (October 2012-September 2013) records an overall confidence rating in the police and police accountability arrangements at 79.3 percent, remaining on par with the previous year’s figure (80.3 percent) (DOJ, 2014). Further details of confidence in the PSNI are provided by the three police specific indicators included in this overall rating:

- 85 percent thought the police provide an ordinary day-to-day service for all the people in Northern Ireland;
- 72.7 percent thought the police do a very or fairly good job in Northern Ireland as a whole;

- and 78.6 percent believed that the police treat Catholics and Protestants equally in Northern Ireland as a whole (DOJ, 2014).

Similarly, the NIPB survey found that 70 percent of respondents thought that the PSNI do a very or fairly good job in Northern Ireland as a whole (with Protestant respondents at 76 percent and Catholic respondents 63 percent); and 73 percent of respondents were very or fairly satisfied that the PSNI treat members of the public fairly in Northern Ireland as a whole (with Protestant respondents at 80 percent and Catholic respondents at 67 percent).

As a brief point of comparison, it is interesting to note that general confidence levels in the police (and local councils) in England and Wales for 2010-2011 was 52 percent; while 50 percent of respondents thought the police could be relied upon when needed; 85 percent thought the police would treat them with respect; and 67 percent thought the police would treat them fairly.

The Northern Ireland levels of public confidence do, however, fall when the focus of the questions shift from the PSNI at a Northern Ireland level to a local level associated with 'people's own area'. For example, the DoJ survey found that:

- 54 percent of respondents were confident that the local police could be relied on to be there when you need them;
- 66 percent had confidence that the local police treat everyone fairly regardless of who they are;
- and 52.7 percent were confident that the local police could be relied on to deal with minor crimes (DOJ, 2014).

The NIPB survey showed a similar reduction in levels of confidence at the local level. There was a 5 percent reduction in those rating the police as doing a very/fairly good job in their local area compared to a very/fairly good job in Northern Ireland as a whole; whilst 46 percent were very/fairly satisfied with the levels of police patrols in their area; and 26 percent were very/fairly dissatisfied (NIPB, 2013). This compares to an overall confidence level in local police of 72% in England and Wales (CSEW, 2014) and 82 percent for An Garda Siochana (Garda, 2008).

As argued by Ellison (2012a:252), such surveys are useful in highlighting general trends in public confidence, but "rather less useful in highlighting police-community relations in specific neighbourhoods and among specific social groups". This is most acute in working-class Republican and Loyalist communities where legitimacy issues with PSNI remain (Topping & Byrne, 2012). As evidenced in this regard, Ellison *et al.* (2012a) in their survey of 280 New Lodge residents found that just 35 percent of respondents felt 'positive change' had occurred within policing, while only 52 percent said they would report a crime directly to the PSNI. And while such questions do not directly

mirror those posed in the official surveys, such findings do offer more localised, community-specific perceptions of confidence in policing. This position has been confirmed by McAlister *et al.* (2009:74) in their research which consisted of 74 interviews across six of the most deprived and alienated communities of Northern Ireland which found that those:

“interviewed across all communities were disillusioned with the police. Many felt that the police were unwilling, unable or ill equipped to deal with an increase in crime and anti-social behaviour. Police tactics had failed to gain the trust of the communities”

However, it must be noted that aside from the two official surveys related to policing Northern Ireland (as noted above), additional quantitative and qualitative academic research exists in terms of capturing confidence in policing. Such research has tended to be intermittent, with the issue of confidence often part of ancillary findings from the research (Byrne & Monaghan, 2008; Topping, 2008a; 2008b; Topping & Byrne, 2012). The only quantitative research based upon focused survey data assessing the determinants of public confidence in the PSNI is the recent work of Ellison *et al.* (2012a). The aim of this particular research was to:

“assess the factors that drive perceptions of the police in a working-class, inner-city community in Northern Ireland [New Lodge] in the context of the developing peace process and ongoing concerns about growing levels of crime and disorder” (Ellison *et al.*, 2012a:3).

This study constructed a measure of confidence that was informed by the instrumental and expressive dimensions of public confidence in the police (Jackson & Sunshine, 2007). The instrumental measure was based around questions that seek to assess “the importance of risk-based assessments about the perceived severity of the crime ‘problem’”, whilst the expressive measure asked questions which tapped into whether “attitudes to crime and punishment are intertwined with moral evaluations of rule breaking and lay prognosis of social cohesion and moral order” (Ellison *et al.*, 2012a).

Whilst there is yet to be any sustained or detailed qualitative research focusing primarily on the drivers of the political, media or community influences on confidence in the PSNI, Byrne and Monaghan’s (2008) wide-ranging interview-based research, for example, offers an account of Republican and Loyalist communities experiences of “the new dispensation of policing in this conflict society” (p111); along with the deep rooted political sensitivities and issues of confidence in the police which remain. Similarly, Topping’s (2008a; 2008b) research into the realization of Patten’s vision of ‘policing with the community’ drew on interviews with Republican and Loyalist community representatives,

revealing local perceptions about the delivery of policing by PSNI and their limited ability to engage sufficiently with diverse community groups and structures. More recently, Topping & Byrne (2012) have carried out a qualitative study “of the relations between communities and Republican paramilitary organizations who seek to exploit a perceived dearth of state-based policing at the community level within Belfast” (p2). And while such studies were not focused on measuring confidence in policing in these localities *per se*, they necessarily tap into questions of these particular communities acceptance of, and support for, the PSNI in their locality *vis-à-vis* political and community influences.

2.3 The Influence of Politicians on Public Confidence

As witnessed throughout the various ebbs and flows of political progress in Northern Ireland, the ability of politicians to influence ‘their’ communities and ‘bring them onboard’ has been paramount to achieving peace (McGarry & O’Leary, 2004). Specifically through their memberships of the wider criminal justice and policing apparatus, politicians now play a *de facto* role in local policing matters – not least since policing and justice powers were devolved to Stormont in 2010.

But at least within a Northern Ireland policing context, no specific research exists which assesses the extent to which politicians influencing public (or communities) attitudes in relation to confidence in the PSNI; or the processes through which this influence might be operating. At best, academics such as Mulcahy (2006) touch on these issues – but not as a central research focus. As suggested by Bradford *et al.* (2014), there are likely to be multiple predictors of people’s ideas about and attitudes towards the police that could be encompassed within political influences, not limited to strength of the democratic process, state legitimacy and historical-institutional context – of course all particularly relevant to Northern Ireland.

Thus, as broadly captured, community attitudes to the police in the country have a tendency to ebb and flow with broader developments in the political sphere in a way that is perhaps more direct than in communities in the rest of the UK (Ellison, 2010). Here, it is argued that the past decade in Northern Ireland has shown that “police reform and political change tend to be two sides of the same coin... movement or inertia in one impacts either negatively or positively on the other”. As may be observed, in 2007 Catholic support for the PSNI increased by 6% in the three months following the decision by Sinn Fein to recognize the PSNI and policing institutions and participate in the associated structures at a political level (*Ibid.*).

More recently, politicians at a national level from both communities (including the country's First Minister) have suggested that PSNI actions have been politically motivated, accusing the police of 'differential treatment' of in regard to public order issues (BBC News, 2014a; BBC Spotlight, 2013). At the level of the locale, it may also be observed that a DUP representative addressing a gathering at a Loyalist parade spoke of being "*ashamed of the PSNI... the political policing and persecution of our protestant people must stop. No surrender everyone, no surrender!*" (BBC Spotlight, 2013). This position has caused the PSNI's Chief Constable to express concern that the PSNI has neither "the political buy in" from Northern Ireland's leading parties, nor has it been provided with a long term vision or social planning framework that is needed to complement policing efforts in these difficult communities (Alaninbelfast, 2013). Speaking in relation to the First Minister's criticism of the police handling of the so-called 'flag protests', the Chief Constable has further argued that the protests were an incredibly volatile situation that was "made all the more difficult by the absence of political consensus" (BBC News 2013c).

Furthermore, the past year has witnessed politicians at all levels calling on members of the public to attend particular parades or protests, even encouraging people to defy the law (Byrne *et al.*, 2013). Indeed, these 'rally cries' and the presence of politicians at contested public events prior to violent exchanges emphasize the political symbolism of police action and add to a community sentiment that the police are somehow acting in accordance to a particular political agenda. More subtly, it may be argued that the politicisation of public order situations are in fact fuelled by lack of political uniformity around adherence to the rule of law – highlighted by Sir Maurice Hayes who noted that the abdication of such responsibility by politicians has left the police making the highly contentious decisions on who can protest and where (BBC Spotlight, 2013).

Reflecting further on the increasingly problematic relationship between Loyalist communities and the PSNI, the public disorder surrounding contentious marches and parades (along with the latest flag-related disputes) can be seen as the outworking – but not an inevitable result – of two key processes which demonstrate how politics can interplay and connect with police reform and the wider peace process. The first process is one of community disengagement and disillusionment which has found itself rooted in "a very large loyalist underclass, poorly educated, mostly unskilled, and socially disadvantaged, who harbour a belief that their culture is no longer valued (Bartlett, 2010:470, cited in Nolan, 2013). This has also been evidenced in the work of McAlister *et al.* (2009:70) who identify that young men in particular, were experiencing 'confusion' as part of transition from conflict to peace, where they "had been brought up with a strong cultural identity- to fight for and defend that identity, sometimes through playing a part in the Conflict. Yet, past expectations had been reversed".

Indeed, the research pointed to the disillusionment felt by young men along with alienation from community life, leading some to assert their masculinity and sectarianism in defence of a culture they deemed 'under threat' (McAlister, 2009:70). When combined with a growing sense of separation from the elected representatives, these issues further generated a sense of distance, even exclusion, from the general transformative social and political developments flowing from the Good Friday Agreement (Byrne & Topping, 2012; McAlister et al, 2009). And in a policing context, this has recently been reflected in the degree of recognition that loyalist paramilitary groups have been granted in terms of their 'stewardship' of communities during the flag protests and the fact that such groups have been "brought back within the unionist fold by the mainstream unionist parties against the backdrop of perceived threats to British culture" (Nolan, 2013:7).

The second process, running concurrently with the first, is the loss of emotional, social and community connections between Loyalist/Unionist communities and the police, which existed prior to the ICP reform process. In this regard, Byrne & Monaghan (2008) found that a major frustration in such areas was that the policing institutions more generally appeared to take for granted traditional positive police-community relations in such areas. But as suggested by the research, there has been a sense that the PSNI no longer represented 'them', with the ICP reform process 'weighted' in favour appeasing Nationalist/Republican politics (Byrne and Monaghan, 2008: 116). Thus, while it may be argued the extent to which such specific claims can be empirically verified is a moot point; it is the under-current of politics and political influence upon attitudes, opinions – and ultimately confidence in the police – which remains.

2.4 The Influence of Community Leaders on Public Confidence

It may be observed that literature or research specifically examining or 'measuring' the influence of community leaders on confidence in the PSNI, let alone the processes through which that might operate, does not exist. It is of course of note that the involvement of communities and their leaders was tacitly recognised in the ICP's vision of a more innovative, inclusive and bottom up approach to policing which would see the function of policing shared by the state and non-state organizations to better reflect Northern Ireland's rich and diverse civic society, whilst simultaneously recognizing the role of a formal police service in these communities (Ellison & O'Rawe, 2010:38; Topping, 2008b).

However, the primary formal mechanism for linking the police, community leaders and the wider community to the PSNI are the Policing and Community Safety Partnerships (PCSPs) – as the amalgamation of the former District

Policing Partnerships (DPPs) and Community Safety Partnerships (CSPs). Intended to be a tool through which communities could be engaged on policing matters and voice their concerns (Topping, 2008:381), the overall effectiveness of both the DPPs and CSPs have been severely questioned elsewhere (Byrne & Topping, 2012). And at the time of writing, the Criminal Justice Inspection Northern Ireland (CJINI) is currently undertaking an inspection of the PCSPs themselves.

But aside from the structural means through which community representation on policing matters may be achieved, it is significant to note in this context that Northern Ireland comprises of an advanced civil society – made up of approximately 4,500 voluntary and community sector organizations who can act as “a resource base around crime and community safety...[and] play a vital role in mediating *between* police and traditionally alienated communities” (Ellison and O’Rawe, 2010:44). As highlighted by Topping (2008: 785), PSNI’s ability to engage with (mainly urban, deprived Loyalist and Republican) communities and manage crime would be considerably diminished if it were not for the level of community-based civil society infrastructure.

Bound up within such local infrastructure, community leaders as part of their role act as mediators between the police and local community members, exerting influence and wielding ‘soft power’ in terms of being able to encourage (or otherwise) individuals and groups in regard to engagement with, and confidence in, the PSNI (Topping, 2008b). Moreover, the existence of well established restorative justice schemes in both Republican and Loyalist communities across the country offers another medium through which community leaders can influence members of their community to interact with the police in a positive and supportive manner, helping to foster trust and confidence in the PSNI (CJINI, 2007).

Away from policing at the level of locale, the important influence of community leaders may also be observed within the context of public order events. Research by Byrne *et al.* (2013) found that the personal and professional relationship between key stakeholders in the community and the local senior command team had a significant impact on how communities viewed public order policing – consequently influencing police confidence. By fostering close-working relationships with organisers of parades or protests in the run up to events, such cooperation between PSNI and community leaders often ensured that events passed off peacefully and without incident.

Thus, the significant role that community leaders play in terms of their potential to influence the perceptions of communities around policing have been witnessed more recently through PSNI’s engagement with representatives of Republican and Loyalist communities in May 2013 when they established two-

day community talks in Cardiff with 25 delegates in order to "discuss opportunities to develop police and community relationships and to build effective partnerships which will help support communities and policing" (PSNI spokesperson, quoted in UTV News, 2013; BBC News, 2013d). Although the extent to which these representatives positively influence community confidence in the police is currently unknown, their ability to help reduce confrontations between their communities and the PSNI through constructive dialogue with the PSNI, may, indirectly, influence perceptions of public confidence in the police by reducing the likelihood of negative interactions with the police that are damaging to trust and confidence.

Equally though, it is also clear that community 'representatives' and leaders also possess the potential to wield their community 'soft power' in a fashion which can be detrimental to community confidence in the police. As outlined by McAlister *et al.* (2009), respondents explained how influential community leaders in their communities, often the so-called 'armchair paramilitaries', perpetuated and actively encouraged a mentality of fear and hostility at the community level; notwithstanding opposition to cooperation with PSNI (McAlister *et al.*, 2009). More recently, in the aftermath of the violence associated with the 'flag-protests' in December 2012/January 2013, which resulted in four days of rioting and 96 arrests, the Chief Constable confirmed that Loyalist paramilitaries were involved in orchestrating the violence (BBC News, 2013c). And in Republican communities too, dissident Republican groups have sought to influence community attitudes towards PSNI (Topping & Byrne, 2012).

And finally in terms of community representatives and potential influence on police confidence, the emergence of public 'voices' such Willie Frazer and Jamie Bryson – as self-appointed voices purporting to represent Protestant/Unionist communities – have proved influential as part of the on-going 'flags dispute' in terms of garnering support for public disobedience and protest. Assisted by an apparent lack of formal political opposition and media attention, their influence may be observed in the prosecution of Willie Frazer as part of his role in encouraging or assisting offences in public addresses (Belfast Telegraph, 2014).

2.5 The Influence of the Media on Public Confidence

In order to understand the influence of the media on public confidence in policing, it is necessary to consider issues related to how the media (television, newspaper, radio, social media) accessed by people in Northern Ireland portray policing and crime; how (actively) the public receive and interpret these portrayals; and how policing as received by the public impacts upon their opinion of, and specifically confidence in, the police. These contentions have never been empirically assessed within the context of Northern Ireland in terms

of available research data. However, some insight can be gained from looking at the wider literature and research emerging in relation to that which impacts upon confidence in police organisations.

As part of wider research on media, crime and justice (a review of which is far beyond the scope of this brief section), the first area to consider is the effect of the media on public opinion – primarily derived from the US (cf. Frost & Monteiro, 2011). Indeed, a key contention is the considerable influence the media can have on public information about crime, as well as how to understand, evaluate and respond to crime. This has led Roberts *et al.* (2003:76) to argue, “the media plays a central role in shaping mainstream views of crime and justice”. Indeed, research has demonstrated that the primary source of public information policing is not derived from personal experience or contact but the media as broadly conceived (Mawby, 2002, cited in Bradford *et al.*, 2008). Similarly, Allen *et al.* (2006), drawing on data from the British Crime Survey, found that local papers, news programmes on television and radio and tabloid and broadsheet papers were the most commonly cited sources of knowledge about the criminal justice system.

While the media has a considerable impact on public opinion, this acknowledgment itself does not explain how this process might affect public confidence in the police. As mentioned earlier, it is necessary to know how the media portrays the police; in particular how it constructs the image of policing (the type and volume of information being offered); and how it frames this image (the way that policing and crime is being presented to the public) (Roberts *et al.*, 2003). Whilst no content analysis has been conducted in Northern Ireland, the general research focus in the UK and US has been media distortion of crime levels and impact upon fear of crime (Roberts *et al.*, 2003; Frost & Monteiro, 2011). It is unsurprising, therefore, that exposure to mass media, in particular TV crime news, has been linked to a stastical increase in fear of crime (Roberts *et al.*, 2003; Chiricos *et al.*, 2000; Garland, 2001).

Connecting this basic overview to public confidence in the police, it may be observed that two potential drivers of public confidence are perceptions of one’s local environment (such as social order and community values); and perceptions of police effectiveness at ‘fighting crime’ (Bradford *et al.*, 2008). It may be argued, therefore, that the media may be indirectly influencing public confidence in the police by affecting public assessments of these two drivers of police confidence – through increasing fear of crime (tapping into safety and stability of local environment); and creating/compounding a sense that the police are failing to be effective in reducing crime (despite the fact that crime, on the whole, has been falling since the 1990s).

However, the empirical support for this connection between media portrayals of crime, policing and confidence remains contested and somewhat underdeveloped. Weitzer (2002) conducted research examining the impact of highly publicized incidents of police misconduct in Los Angeles and New York City on public attitudes towards the police, using before and after polls conducted by well known broadsheet newspapers in both cities. The results showed that the press highlighting issues of police brutality and corruption negatively influenced attitudes. Whilst it should be noted that attitudes towards the police generally returned to pre-incident levels, Weitzer (2002:406) reminds us that the most disturbing incidents are not easily forgotten and become part of the 'cultural repertoire' of the aggrieved communities. Reflecting on Northern Ireland, the considerable media publicity given to the public order incidents in Northern Ireland more generally, along with the on-going security threat to the PSNI, may help to sustain a particular image of the police, where the PSNI are presented in a predominant light in the public eye. And finally, the media's impact upon police confidence is considered by Miller *et al.* (2004) and their study conducted in New York City over a 9-month period. Observing that variations in media coverage of policing were not reflected in public opinion recorded in their surveys, it suggests that changes in news coverage of the police may not easily sway people's views of the police when set against pre-existing perceptions.

However, when making the link between media depictions of crime, policing and public confidence in the police, it is also necessary to recognize that not all recipients of media messages will understand and be affected by them in the same way, regardless of the exposure level (Surette, 1998). Various factors including age, ethnicity, religion, socio-economic background, previous victimisation and relations with the police status all mediate the impact of media messages and influence on public. Though from a PSNI perspective, their response to media coverage of two police officers dragging a incapacitated female across the road and leaving her in a bus lay-by is instructive. As noted by an Assistant Chief Constable: "This is a bad day for confidence in policing" (BBC News, 2014b) – highlighting their sensitivity to operational practice and corporate image as part of being seen to engender confidence through personal, protective and professional policing.

3.0 Methodology

The following section outlines the central aims and objectives of the research along with the methodology employed as part of the overall research related to influence of politicians, media and community representatives on confidence in the PSNI.

3.1 Research aims and objectives

The main focus of the research was to provide a qualitative, empirical assessment of the key dynamics related to political, media and community representative influences upon confidence in PSNI. More specifically, the research aims include:

- Analyse and assess existing research and literature related to confidence in policing;
- Consider current baseline figures of confidence in PSNI as produced by the NIPB and DoJ, as well as alternative/diverging confidence metrics derived from research;
- Provide an understanding of 'confidence' from the perspectives of the media, community leaders and politicians;
- Explain the key intersections between the media, community leaders and politicians with specific reference to how those interactions impact upon confidence in the PSNI.

3.2 Research Methodology

In order to comprehensively address all of the research aims and objectives, it was appropriate to develop a methodology that was both flexible and adaptable in terms of its applicability to stakeholders and representatives from political, community and media spheres. It should be noted from the outset that the present research is the first of its kind to address the issue of the dynamics underpinning confidence from political, community representative and media perspectives. In this regard, while needing a robust methodological approach it must be acknowledged that the research is simultaneously exploratory – with no pre-existing models, approaches nor confidence metrics upon which the research could be framed, nor findings tested. Finally, it is important to highlight that throughout the duration of the research the researchers kept in regular contact with representatives of the NIPB to ratify elements of the methodology and provide updates on the research. The research approach is therefore outlined below.

3.3 Research Design

In the context of the research design, it is important to consider one's methodological 'approach' in order to guide the practical data gathering for what is being researched. As is clear from the literature and methodological considerations, the issue of confidence in police organisations is situated firmly within the 'social world'. In this respect, there are no single 'truths' or 'realities', which can be definitively captured, interpreted or explicated. McNeill and Chapman (2005) suggest that researchers must be careful to acknowledge that their interpretation of data may only be one of many. It is therefore important to adopt ways of thinking that adequately appreciate the complex and variegated issues of such 'real world' research.

3.4 Qualitative versus Quantitative Research

When considering a methodology for the research, a useful starting point is in regard to the appropriateness of qualitative or quantitative approaches to research phenomenon. Indeed, when considering the social context in which confidence in policing is generated, it is interesting to note that:

'both qualitative and quantitative researchers are concerned with the individuals' point of view. However, qualitative investigations...can get closer to the actors' perspective through detailed interviewing...They argue that quantitative researchers are seldom able to capture their subject's perspective because they have to rely on more remote, inferential empirical methods and materials' (Denzin and Lincoln, 2000 cited in Silverman, 2004:342).

Indeed, qualitative research has a further advantage insofar as it captures the conditions and situations in which activity is, or is not undertaken. Thus, while qualitative research may not be able to provide scientific reflections *of* the social world, it does allow access *into* the social world and context which shape and guide experiences (Miller and Glassner, 2004).

At this point, it is apt to note neither policing nor confidence from political, community or media perspectives is a fixed or static phenomenon; with one able to influence the others. Confidence in the PSNI is additionally guided by local conditions, lending itself to a qualitative approach because such fluid 'social' aspects cannot adequately be represented where they are bound by rigid, pre-specified methods and the detailed hypothesis of quantitative work (Willis, 2007). Thus, situations, settings and contexts in which confidence in policing is generated from such a multitude of perspectives cannot necessarily be characterised by the quantitative, discrete logic of 'fact finding' which becomes refracted and blurred through our 'webs of significance', unique to each and every social context and interaction (Geertz, 1975; Rubin and Rubin, 2005).

3.5 Choosing the Methodology

Having identified the value of qualitative research for work in hand, it is now important to consider an appropriate research method. Though throughout this section, it must be remembered that it is necessary to choose a methodology, which allows for both consistency and reliability within and between the various groups and organisations that have a stake and/or influence in police confidence.

Indeed, because of the small-scale nature of the current research and time constraints, the logical consideration for a qualitative research method is that of the interview. It is important to understand that interviews are in two main forms: either structured, semi-structured or unstructured formats. In reference to the former, they have been criticised by interpretivists because of the closed nature of the questions, rigid structure and pre-coded answers, which McNeill and Chapman (2005:57) argue devalues the

‘experience of the respondent because it is effectively saying that unless the respondent has had an experience similar to the one mentioned in the interview schedule, the sociologist is not interested in them’.

Though in reference to the latter, McNeill and Chapman (2005:58) note they have a distinct advantage for eliciting qualitative data insofar as they do not impose pre-set questions and replies, while providing an opportunity for the respondent ‘to say what they want rather than what the interviewer might expect’. And while semi-structured interviews (SSIs) present their own difficulties in terms of analysing the vast quantities of data they produce, it is to semi-structured interviews that this section shall now turn in order to assess both the utility and practicality for researching community policing and the governance of security.

3.6 Semi-Structured Interviews

At a basic level, Kiely and Peek (2002) have contended that not only are semi-structured interviews rich sources of ethnographic data in themselves, but they also evidence:

‘patterns of basic assumptions – invented, discovered or developed by a given group...that has worked well enough to be considered valid and, therefore to be taught to...members in the correct way to perceive, think and feel...’ (Schein, 1985 cited in Kiely and Peek, 2002:170).

This is ultimately important to understand the various views, opinions and attitudes of political, community and media stakeholders whereby at the root of interviews:

'is an interest in understanding the lived experience of other people and the meaning they make of that experience...Interviewing allow us to put behaviour in context and provides access to understanding action' (Seidman, 2006:9-10).

Furthermore, semi-structured interviews allow respondents to highlight some of their vivid illustrations, iconic moments and experiences, as authentic accounts of subjective experience related to wider cultural and organisational contexts (Rubin and Rubin, 2005; Long and Godfrey, 2004). Importantly, semi-structured interviews also allow researchers to probe both positive and negative aspects of experiences around confidence in the police; and for respondents to reveal issues which are novel or not previously considered – or those which might be termed 'outside the box' (Miller and Glassner, 2004).

3.7 Review of Literature on Political, Community Representative and Media Influences on Confidence in Policing

The researchers team conducted a comprehensive analysis of available policy documents, academic research and reports related to confidence in policing from the perspective of politicians, community representatives and media influences. It must be noted that little empirical material exists on confidence in policing generally in Northern Ireland, especially when set against the volume of work focused on England the North America. In this regard, the research team drew information from a wide range of publications as part of informing the current research; and where necessary, drew out implications for confidence and policing within a Northern Ireland context.

3.8 Semi-Structured Interviews

The core aspect of empirical approach involved 20 semi-structured interviews (Table 1 – see below) with representatives from the political parties, community representatives from a range of community backgrounds, and media stakeholders representing both print and broadcast outlets. Interviewees were identified and selected on the basis of their experience of, and involvement with, policing issues. Two interviews were conducted with those involved in communications with the NIPB and the PSNI to assist in the analysis of the findings. These discussions assisted the researchers with an understanding of the challenges around 'communication' facing the respective organisations. With the help of the NIPB where necessary, the research team contacted organisations and individuals and asked them to participate in the research. Following initial conversations, the researchers met willing participants to conduct the interviews. A series of themes were used to guide the discussions with interviewees (See *Appendix A*).

For the purposes of confidentiality and anonymity, interviewees' personal details and affiliations have not been included in the research – identified as either 'political respondents', 'community respondents' or 'media respondents' – again, to retain the anonymity of responses. It should additionally be noted that the present research was considered and approved by the Faculty of Social Sciences Ethics Filter Committee at University of Ulster as per their *Code of Practice for Professional Integrity in the Conduct of Research*.

A number of general themes were developed to structure the discussions with participants, including:

- a. The relationship between the current baseline figures of confidence in PSNI as produced by the NIPB and alternative/diverging research metrics;
- b. An understanding of what is understood by 'confidence' from the perspectives of the media, community leaders and politicians;
- c. An understanding of the key intersections between the media, community leaders and politicians with specific reference to how those interactions impact upon confidence in the PSNI

Table 1: Interview Participants

Designation	Number of interviewees
<i>Voluntary and community sector representatives</i> – youth; race; sexual orientation; disability; gender; ethnicity and religion	8
<i>Media representatives</i> – print, television and social media	5
Political representatives – Sinn Fein; Ulster Unionist; Democratic Unionist; SDLP, and Alliance parties	5
Policing institutions – representatives from NIPB and PSNI communications	2
Total number of interviewees	20

4.0 Findings on Confidence and the Media

The following section draws together the main themes to emerge from the discussions with those representing the media (as broadly conceived) in Northern Ireland. The interviewees were all long-standing journalists engaged in a number of different mediums to publish their work. Discussions focused on a number of areas, including: the changing nature of the media; the role of social media; and the extent to which the media actually influences (in both the short and long term) public confidence in the PSNI. A number of themes emerged, as outlined below.

4.1 Roles and Responsibilities

A significant issue to emerge from media participants was that as journalists, it was not necessarily their role to act as advocates for the PSNI, nor was it their responsibility to generate 'confidence' in policing or the related institutions more generally. It was articulated that (notwithstanding editorial positions) their job was to report in an unbiased and professional manner, with the public responsible for interpreting the information presented. Indeed, typical responses included:

'not our job to promote community confidence in the police'

'there is no such thing as good or bad news...people make their own judgements'

There was, however, an acknowledgement that the media as a whole was significant in shaping public levels of confidence in policing, but could not be seen in isolation from wider 'influencers' – such as personal experiences, geographic location, community background – as key dynamics of confidence in the police above and beyond that which is publicly reported.

4.2 'Citizen' Journalists

An interesting theme to emerge from the fieldwork related to that which constituted the definition of 'being a journalist in 2014'. There was agreement that significant changes regarding technology along with the growth of social media had given virtually anyone the potential to become a 'citizen journalist'. As noted:

'it's not just the mainstream media that have a spotlight on the police, it's also the public through the use of phones'

Examples ranging from the video capture of everyday police encounters through to more recent incidents, such as that in Derry/Londonderry involving PSNI officers leaving a woman in a bus lane – cited as examples of local people setting the agenda around ‘confidence in policing’.

Furthermore, a significant consequence of this was the fact much publicly consumed information on policing was neither regulated nor bound by checks and balances associated with the traditional media reporting. The media in its broadest sense was therefore seen as a powerful tool through which to influence confidence in policing. However, recent example where individuals with particular agendas had become part of the media spectrum were also cited as having exerted influence on wider public perceptions of policing:

‘now-a-days, it just takes one person to video something out of context and it goes viral and then the public form a particular opinion about the police that isn’t necessarily the correct one’

Several participants also felt there needed to be more sophisticated degrees of clarity about the term ‘media’ and its interface with confidence in policing insofar as one participant summarily noted:

‘the media is not a monolith, it is not homogenous’

Finally, it was also suggested that the PSNI were playing ‘catch-up’ in terms of the growth of social media, along with its ability to spontaneously and instantaneously disseminate information – along with the potential of that to mediate public confidence in the police. As noted:

‘the police have to be mindful that they are increasingly losing command and control powers at the hands of social media’

Additionally, it was recounted by one respondent that set within the ‘new’ world of social media, 24 news, and necessary need for proactivity around information production, PSNI stood somewhere on the ‘level of Ceefax’. However, it was also noted that at the local level there were some examples of good practice i.e. the PSNI in Hollywood and their use of Facebook.

4.3 What Gets Reported?

There was also agreement from respondents that the media were naturally more prone to report negative instances of police practice as opposed to ‘good news’ stories of policing. As one participant noted:

‘when policing is done well, that’s normal, so it doesn’t get reported; but when it goes wrong, of course we are going to discuss it’

There was also a recognition that ‘negative policing’ was *de facto* more newsworthy and that it could of course have a detrimental effect on levels of confidence. But as another representative claimed:

‘we have a role not as PR people but as conduits to tell the story’

4.4 Power of the Media

As previously noted, there was a consensus that the media had the potential to be key influencers in terms of how the public formed their views, perceptions and opinions of the PSNI – in turn impacting upon levels confidence. Indeed, this was contextualised insofar the vast majority of the public do not have regular encounters with the police and that:

‘the majority of people’s interactions with the police emerge through the media and obviously this will affect opinions and perceptions’

However, it was reinforced on multiple occasions that the mainstream media do not deliberately, nor were there attempts to, sway public confidence in the PSNI. Rather, the media performed their role in highlighting issues of public importance from the perspective of their own editorial positions and very simply:

‘it’s not the media’s role to be a cheerleader for new policing’

4.5 Legacy of the Past

It was interesting to note that all of the interviewees felt that the media had become a key mechanism in generating public debate on issues related to ‘legacy’ and ‘the past’. This further had the potential to negatively impact upon confidence in the policing institutions because of the fact it remained as a ‘standard’, background feature through which ‘everyday’ policing was refracted. In recent years, the media had been central in reporting on numerous issues about the conflict and the role of policing bodies. However, a consequence of this was that:

‘the media continue to report on the past, and this inadvertently sticks to the PSNI and obviously has a negative affect on public confidence’

4.6 Summary

From the discussions with media representatives, a number of themes have emerged around their role in influencing (or not) public confidence in the PSNI and policing institutions:

- The mainstream media, beyond editorial positions, have no deliberative agenda around public confidence in the PSNI specifically;
- The media is a powerful tool in shaping people's opinions which ultimately manifests in levels of confidence, especially through the dominant newsworthiness of negative stories;
- Everyone has the potential to be a journalist which leads to a lack of accountability and regulation and allows local agendas to influence the types of 'story' that make it to the public sphere;
- The media has become the main mechanism for debating the past, which can have a very negative effect on how the public may, or may not, view the current policing institutions.

5.0 Findings on Confidence and the Community

It was felt from the outset of the research that it was important to consider the views of a number of representatives and stakeholders from a cross-section of society. The researchers took the decision to recognise 'community workers' as those that represent the needs of a particular constituency and advocate on their behalf. Through these conversations a number of themes emerged, as discussed below.

5.1 Defining Confidence

From the outset, participants were clear that confidence in policing was a very 'personal' issues (in both an individual and community sense) and that their role as community representatives was about supporting their own constituency along with issues related to policing and justice. In terms of how the community measured and assessed confidence, several interviewees concluded that:

'It is about the arresting of offenders and the reporting of crime...essentially knowing that the police are doing what they are supposed to be doing'

Indeed, from this particular perspective, confidence was viewed as very much an operational issue to be lived and experienced on the ground.

5.2 Roles and responsibilities

Participants also agreed that one element of their work involved engaging with the police and the communities they represented on issues such as fear of crime; building relationships, particular incidents, and the under-reporting of crime. Generally, this work involved:

- facilitating meetings between the community and police;
- assisting the police on understanding community issues;
- working with the community to address issues around policing and community safety.

It was felt that it was not the role of community workers to influence (either positively or negatively) levels of community confidence in the PSNI. Community workers and representatives simply saw themselves as there to support their own constituencies and articulate views and concerns of local interest.

However, it was also noted that their role – as sitting somewhere in between the wider public and the PSNI – had a tendency to be problematic with respect to the issue of confidence in the police. As noted by one respondent:

‘Along with challenging the police, we encourage people to work with the police and build a relationship...but then someone has a bad experience and they tell other people in the community, and the next thing we are being dragged into the discussion and people start questioning our motives and role’

5.3 PSNI ‘don’t help their cause’

According to several respondents, there are occasions when PSNI through action, omission or simply lack of public information (regardless of the role of community workers), negatively impacted upon levels of confidence in their organisation. In this regard, one respondent felt that the police were extremely poor at presenting all that ‘is good about them’ and managing their own ‘confidence story’:

‘The PSNI are simply not good at selling their good points...they sometimes don’t make our job any easier’

Furthermore, a number of participants felt that in terms of generating confidence, PSNI continued to operated under ‘a veil of secrecy’, and often perceived to fall back on their ‘default’ position of public silence over particular issues:

‘They need to be more open in acknowledging mistakes in order to build confidence, instead of talking in an operational language that people simply think is being used to hide the truth’

Indeed, virtually all participants agreed that inconsistencies around service delivery within the PSNI had the biggest potential to damage levels of public confidence. The view was that while strategic tiers of PSNI recognised the importance of confidence, there was a lack of ‘trickle down’ to operational levels in terms of how confidence can be manipulated, shaped and affected by police actions and behaviours. As summarily noted by one respondent:

‘PSNI are positive in terms of wanting to do the right thing, but it takes time to filter down to the individual officers’

5.4 Competing Community Narratives

It was also discussed in more specific cases that ‘community workers,’ or those that allege to advocate for specific constituencies, can negatively impact public confidence in policing. These discussions focused primarily on Loyalist and

Republican communities, where people felt that individuals could project a particular narrative that could shape local opinions and view:

‘There are people who use their status as ‘community workers’ to articulate a message that is about lowering confidence in the PSNI...but this is all about their own agenda and not the needs of the community’

Another participant noted that through the advent of social media, it had become more simple for such persons to ‘peddle alternative messages’ and try and influence the public around policing and community safety. Especially in what may be described as ‘hard-to-reach’ communities, it was noted that:

‘The dissenting voices try to reinvent themselves through social media on contentious issues’

5.5 Levels of Confidence

There were a number of debates with interviewees about the levels of confidence in policing across communities. The reality was that there was no clear consensus from participants about the overall level of societal or community confidence. So much depended on wider issues (media and political) impacting on that particular community, notwithstanding historical relationships with the policing institutions:

‘Each community is different in terms of how confident they feel in the police...it all depends on what’s going on with them as a community i.e. are they being persecuted, targeted, discriminated against...but also do they have bad history with the police...all this goes into how they view the PSNI’

More specifically, issues with young people emerged in a number of conversations. There was a sense that regardless of ethnic or community background, young people lacked confidence in policing structures, or an ability to engage or influence them:

‘Generally there is a lack of confidence from young people in the PSNI, and this is more than anecdotal; there is research to evidence this...stop and search; the use of discretion, to name but a few examples...this makes it so hard for us to try and encourage them to engage with the PSNI’

5.6 Summary

From the discussions with community representatives, it is clear that a number of themes have emerged around their role in influencing public confidence in the PSNI:

- Community leaders do not see it as their role to try and positively or negatively influence public confidence in the police;
- Community leaders have an important role in both challenging and supporting the police which may have an impact upon confidence in policing;
- Their experiences tell them that while strategically the PSNI recognise what can and cannot affect levels of confidence, this has not transcended throughout the organisation in terms of operational practice.

6.0 Political Views

Each of the main political parties in the NI Executive participated in the research, with discussions focusing on a range of issues that included measures of confidence, police behaviour, and the power of words and actions, as detailed below.

6.1 Understanding Confidence

In terms of that which constitutes public confidence in the police, participants were clear that as a concept, it was multi-layered and that it was a very personal indicator to measure and assess:

‘It depends on who you ask, and where they live and people will also differ in terms of how they make assumptions about the police’

It was also suggested that confidence was very much based on ‘perception and not reality’, but that it was also drawn from assumptions about levels of local crime; feeling safe and seeing the police within the community – and not necessarily ‘hard facts’ which were sometimes deemed to be scarce.

6.2 Words and Deeds

There was a general acceptance that politicians had the potential to influence public confidence in the policing structures through their actions and words. It was also noted that an *absence* of words or actions (or the omission of praise) had the potential to impact upon public confidence in the PSNI. As summarily recounted:

‘Politicians always need to think about how their words will be interpreted within the wider public as they ultimately can influence opinions...but they also have to realise what effect saying nothing will have’

‘Silence in a situation where the police have been attacked or indeed publicly criticised for their actions in public order situations is tantamount to implicit support for the actions of the mob’

All of the participants stressed that ‘they think very carefully’ about public statements in relation to policing because of an acute awareness of how statements could be interpreted by the community and could affect the public’s attitude towards the PSNI.

Further analysis revealed that critical public comments on policing from politicians could be defined in two categories. Firstly, there was *positive criticism*, primarily about holding the PSNI to account and maintaining public

confidence by showing that there was independent oversight over policing operations. However, there also appeared to be *grandstanding criticism*, which was more about politicians using policing issues as an opportunity to appeal to their own constituency as part of public debates about the actions of the PSNI. This was seen to undermine public confidence in the PSNI and impact upon relationships between local communities and police officers.

6.3 Balancing Local Constituencies And Wider Public Confidence

There were a series of interesting discussions on the challenges for politicians around appealing to their own electorate juxtaposed with their image to the wider public. A number of respondents used the example of the recent flag protests, when politicians came under pressure from their own community to openly criticise the policing operation. However, decisions were taken not to do this due to the potentially detrimental impact on wider levels of confidence in the policing institutions:

‘We are constantly making judgements on issues around policing and community safety, and sometimes we have to say things that our own electorate find very hard to hear’

Indeed, a number of elected representatives noted it was very much a ‘balancing act’ in that they try not to criticise the PSNI or specific policing operations in public due to the potential for the negative impact on public confidence, which may flow. In this regard, it was noted that:

‘I am very conscious about the effects of critical comments on the police...I try to when possible not be overly critical, but wait until the cameras are away and then discuss the issues’

6.4 Politics and Policing

There was an agreement from interviewees that although the wider police reform process had created a necessary ‘distance’ between politics and policing, they were still inextricably linked insofar as one respondent noted that the policing/political relationships were:

‘Not like they were in the past, but in a ‘normal’ way. The Board and PCSPs are the platforms in which the community, politics and police can work together’

Politicians additionally had an important role in advocating the needs and concerns of their electorate and facilitating dialogue between them and the police. However, it was also noted that in political terms, confidence was a ‘double-edged sword’. In explaining this point, one respondent noted that as

part of their role on the NIPB/PCSPs, they had a functional obligation to work with the policing institutions and articulate the 'corporate line' on policing matters. Yet in terms of the interface with their own political constituents on the same matters, they would often articulate a very different narrative – creating the potential to either contradict the police institutional 'line'; or create confusion as to whether the PSNI were politically supported in certain matters.

6.5 Summary

From the discussions with political representatives, a number of themes have emerged around their role in influencing public confidence in the PSNI:

- Their words and actions have the power to influence levels of confidence in policing;
- Absence of words, actions or praise for police operations can have negative consequences for community confidence in the police;
- That politics was not a separate entity for the reality of policing in Northern Ireland and that politics very much underpins confidence in the PSNI – particularly over contested and/or legacy issues;
- That politicians – through the policing structures – operate a dual mandate in terms of police-institutional obligations and roles which sometime conflict with demands on policing at the level of constituency.

7.0 Discussion

Following the discussions with media, community and political representatives, a number of themes have emerged which provide an insight into their role and ability to influence public confidence in policing. The following conclusions draw on those discussions and consider their implications through a series of recommendations.

7.1 Overview of Research

The findings would indicate that confidence in the PSNI – as a general concept capturing trust and legitimacy – is both generated and mediated by a range of dynamics, which remain outside their control. In this regard, it is clear that political, media or community ‘influencers’ command significant, if indirect power to sway local community opinion on policing matters. This is particularly prevalent in matters relating to ‘legacy’ where politics, community voices and media influences coalesce and through which opinions about ‘everyday’ policing become refracted.

However, it is also evident that PSNI’s ‘place’ within this equilibrium of confidence would benefit where PSNI can more fully take charge of, and be more proactive in, the promotion of positive operational practice. With a general media reluctance to cover ‘good news’ stories related to policing, this in fact presents PSNI with an opportunity to generate their own positive ‘media’. This would go some way to off-setting the apparent *status quo* where PSNI primarily react in a *post facto* manner to negative stories and events. Furthermore, where PSNI are continually ‘reacting’ to negative or alternative accounts of operations, it was evident that they lost the ability to set their own confidence agenda due to the fact they were constantly reacting to agendas externally set by others.

In terms of the *media* specifically, the findings suggest that their role is not to explicitly influence public confidence in policing *per se*, but instead to report news stories according to editorial parameters, with the public free to form their own interpretations and opinions. One of the main points of interest centred on the emerging impact of ‘citizen journalists’ whereby social media has transformed the flows of information about policing – both in terms of how they are produced and consumed. While criticism may be levelled at the traditional media more generally as to the reporting of particular stories or incidents, it must be noted that this does not preclude PSNI from the more proactive production of their own ‘counter narratives’. Furthermore, it should be noted that media sources and outlets of all kind remain as independent public information intermediaries and within reason, cannot nor should be overly criticised for discharging this role – especially where this remains but one dynamic of many impacting on police confidence.

In terms of politics, politicians and public confidence in the police, a significant issue relates to the fact that politics has not, nor cannot be divorced from the issue of policing – even within the post-Independent Commission on Policing reform era. Through the necessary structure of the NIPB and PCSPs, the position of politicians is both a necessary and desirable part of police oversight, accountability and the representation of public views on policing generally within Northern Ireland’s democratic system. However, it appears that such ‘normal’ levels of politics have the potential to both overlap with, and be influenced by, political opportunism – itself often linked to contentious and legacy-type issues which remain as salient and cyclical issues. The research would therefore suggest the question to be asked is how to ‘balance’ normal political inclusion within the policing structures as part of a political divided (and often unstable) environment?

In reference to community representatives, the research has pointed to the fact they play a significant, unquantifiable role in developing community confidence at a local level. With confidence as a ‘personal’ community trait, they were often the ‘face’ of that – wielding ‘soft power’ at a local level. However, their ability to control and/or manipulate confidence remained a finite capacity when set against either inconsistent policing or lack of/contradictory information. Thus, as part of understanding the production of community confidence in more detail, community representatives tread a fine reputational line when faced with local policing ‘dilemmas’ – to be carefully managed by PSNI as part of both strategic and operational considerations. Though beyond simple, generic contentions about their abilities to influence confidence, it is important to return to some of the key distinctions in the literature related to confidence insofar as it is comprised of both legitimacy and trust. While community representatives may be able to influence these distinct dynamics, where both are ‘lost’ to representatives, confidence then spins out of their hands and is more directly related to police action. In this regard, more clear understandings of what trust and legitimacy in police mean at a community level may allow for more tailored operational and strategic options which can influence (positively) one or both of these options as part of community confidence and avoid loss of both.

Finally, it is also evident from the findings that confidence in PSNI is simultaneously generated from multiple sources – the sum of which is greater than individual media, political or community influences in isolation. This in turn may be interpreted and summarised as follows:

- Confidence in policing is hostage to political fortune for events and issues not directly within PSNI’s control;
- Confidence in PSNI is not a constant nor should it necessarily be treated as a such;

- That public confidence in PSNI is taken from narrow (often negative) contexts PSNI need to be more proactive in broadening out positive public knowledge of policing;
- And beyond national NIPB confidence figures, there is an absence of any detailed confidence benchmarks from those groups most affected by policing and crime issues.

7.1 Potential areas of action

As part of research, a number of key issues have emerged with regard to the complexity of that which comprises confidence from political, community and media perspectives. The research set out to deliver a number of potential 'actions' as part of this exploratory study. They are outlined as follows:

1. The PSNI must be more proactive in delivering, disseminating and 'countering' negative media coverage in relation to setting their own organisational and operational agendas;
2. Where possible, PSNI should engage in greater degrees of information sharing in order to reduce the space in which alternative policing narratives may develop;
3. The NIPB and PSNI must revisit their metrics of confidence currently used to define such levels in the policing institutions. The research suggests that more sophisticated social scientific means of capturing confidence should be developed to account for the dynamics raised by the research;
4. The NIPB should provide more qualified accounts and narratives of police confidence which take account of social and political developments;

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