Co-operation or unification: Is the future of police multi-agency working simply to become one agency?

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Abstract
In 2014 Professor Tim Hope stated that he would “give up the police service”, proposing that the “police service should merge thoroughly with health, ambulance and fire services to become a harm-response service”. This article examines the practicalities of such a proposal, considering different aspects within policing that require multi-agency co-operation and whether that could be replaced by unification. It concludes that in all instances, bar one notable exception in the form of mental health response, the police necessarily stand apart from other agencies for good reason and that unification would be counterproductive to Hope’s aims.

Keywords
Police, Multi-Agency, Harm, Public Protection, Community Policing, MASH, MARAC, Mental Health

Introduction
In an opinion piece for *The Centre for Crime and Justice Studies* considering the state of the police service in the United Kingdom, Tim Hope (2014) rather dramatically and succinctly states he would ‘give up the police service’, based on a perspective that ‘there is no evidence that they are effective in any of the tasks and functions they set themselves to perform in society’. Indeed, this view seems to fall in line with much of Professor Hope’s broadly negative viewpoint of policing and crime theory, on which he seems to stand...
broadly apart from his peers (Hope, 2008) (Hope, 2009) (Hope, 2015) (Hope, 2020). It would likely be a fair assumption that survivors of various offences who have received justice as a result of police interventions and investigations might disagree with his viewpoint; whilst accepting that there are also some groups who may agree, such as the Black Lives Matter movement (Scales, 2020). The almost unarguable evidence in support of the ideas he nay-says would also seem to undermine his argument e.g. the evidence of crime reduction through hotspot policing demonstrated by Braga et al. (2019). He concludes his piece by advocating for a unified ‘harm response’ service, necessitating an understanding of current police responses to ‘harm’ alongside those of other agencies. ‘Harm’ herein is taken to be the definition under the College of Policing ‘Threat, Harm and Risk’ model (West Midlands Police, 2021) which is simply ‘to injure, damage or hurt’. This concept of harm prevention will be paramount in assessing the feasibility of Hope’s suggestion. Whilst Hope’s statement is no doubt intended to be deliberately provocative, as with all such things, could there be an underlying grain of plausibility to the future police-free utopia he seeks?

**Background**

In the societal landscape of 2021, the police no longer function in isolation. An agency originally charged solely with the enforcement of laws is now part of a complex web of various public, private and charity sector bodies. (Crawford, et al., 2005). By one recent estimate as much as 84% of all calls to the police no longer relate to crime (College of Policing, 2015a: p. 16). ‘Vulnerability’ is the new buzzword in an era where an additional four words have been formally appended to Sir Robert Peel’s foundational principles of policing: ‘the primary purpose of the police is to prevent crime and disorder and to protect people’ [emphasis added] (Her Majesty’s Inspectorate of Constabulary, 2015, p. 5). This can be demonstrated by the bespoke assessment of policing responses to this sole topic, undertaken by the police’s formal review body Her Majesty’s Inspectorate of Constabulary (HMIC) (2015).

Even police incidents that do constitute a criminal offence, or those that the public consciousness would call for the police to deal with, such as domestic abuse in the former category or anti-social behaviour (ASB) in the latter, involve significant areas of safeguarding and often complex multi-agency working (College of Policing, 2015a). Serious case reviews or Independent Office of Police Conduct (IOPC) investigations into failings of the police in tragic instances such as those of Fiona Pilkington and Bijan Ebrahimi, consistently demonstrate both the human need for the police and other agencies to work more collaboratively, and the public expectation of them to do so (Independent Police Complaints Commission, 2009) (McCallum, 2017). Independent reviews of both cases cited significant failures of inter-agency communication, which led to numerous safeguarding opportunities being missed. This was highlighted as a key reason why both individuals were overlooked by those same agencies, including the police, who were tasked with their protection, tragically resulting in their untimely deaths. Public outcry highlighted by the media called for changes in police responses (Walker, 2009) (Chaytor, 2009) (BBC News, 2017) (Morris, 2017). Indeed, breakdowns in multi-agency
communications and information sharing are cited as being one of the most common areas of failure that lead to deaths or serious injuries necessitating such serious case reviews, of which the police are usually one of the key protagonists (Ofsted, 2010: p. 5) (National Society for the Prevention of Cruelty to Children NSPCC, 2016).

It is against this backdrop that the police in England and Wales have significantly expanded their co-operation with other agencies over the preceding three or more decades. Set against the insights of the ‘Morgan Report’ (Home Office, 1991) the ‘pluralisation’ of policing (Johnston, 1993) (Johnston, 2003) has become increasingly common in recent decades. There is an evident and ever-expanding mixed-economy solution to resolving crime and disorder, alongside other key societal issues including vulnerability, mental health, domestic abuse and ASB, to name but a few.

Plural policing is a concept that arguably began in 1959 when Capt. Popkess, Chief Constable of Nottingham City Police, first pitched his idea to the Home Secretary of ‘a body of men, eager for police work, but barred by height or age to deal with trifling motoring offences like illegal parking and obstruction’ (Kitchener, 1959: p. 78), leading to the creation of civilian traffic wardens (Popkess, 1959). From that time until the present, British policing has evolved to include a raft of civilian roles (most notably Police Community Support Officers (PCSO’s)), and concurrently become reliant on a host of external partners in order to provide an effective service in response to all the modern demands placed upon it (Crawford, et al., 2005).

This pluralism has ceased to relate to functions exclusively carried out by specifically named partner agencies working in conjunction with the police. Moreover, it now relates to functions carried out through defined and even legislated-for multi-agency bodies. Nowhere is this more evident than under the umbrella term of ‘public protection’ (Turner and Colombo, 2007). No doubt named in line with the later addition to the Peelian vision, ‘public protection’ is the arena of policing that focuses on safeguarding-related concerns, be they: child or adult abuse – sexual, domestic or otherwise; serious sexual offending; exploitation; or management of dangerous offenders. Information sharing and general co-operation failings were highlighted as being significant, root-cause issues in several high-profile deaths such as those of: Victoria Climbié (Laming, 2003); Holly Wells and Jessica Chapman (Bichard, 2004), ‘Baby Peter’ Connolly (LSCB Haringey, 2009) and Daniel Pelka (Lock, 2013) and born of the recommendations of those, multi-agency working was significantly expanded.

**Public protection – adult and child safeguarding**

Principle among the emerging formal information sharing processes for safeguarding was the Multi-Agency Risk Assessment Conference (MARAC). Established in Cardiff in 2003, MARAC’s formally brought together professionals from diverse sectors including the police, probation, social care, social housing providers, community mental health professionals, victim services and other relevant professional bodies (Maguire, et al., 2001). MARAC was itself a product of the recently legislated Multi-Agency Public
Protection Arrangements (MAPPA) mandated under the Criminal Justice and Court Services Act, 2000, aimed at managing so-called ‘dangerous’ offenders. Where the law mandated that convicted criminals were to be managed from a holistic public sector perspective, MARAC was a more organically established attempt at helping victims to become survivors and ensuring information on their abusers was appropriately shared between agencies who may not otherwise have had it (Robinson, 2004). The MARACs were held monthly and comprised of participation from the police, social care, probation, local authority, housing, health and relevant charities. The success of these meetings between all relevant professionals who held vested interests in safeguarding high-risk victims, in terms of reduction in repeat victimisation and increased co-operation with the justice system was unequivocal (Robinson, 2004) (Robinson, 2005). Deaths and violence associated with domestic abuse plummeted, demand on the police by those persons subject to the programme significantly dropped, and fewer children were placed on the Child Protection Register (Merrick, 2006).

Chief amongst the concerns about the monthly MARAC meetings however was the amount of time dedicated to each specific case (McCoy, et al., 2016) (McLaughlin, 2015). MARACs also only considered the very highest risk cases – again resulting from the severe time constraints. The natural progression of this was to therefore abandon the concept of removing the time-limited period during which the diverse professionals interacted and make it a full-time approach. Thus was the Multi-Agency Safeguarding Hub (MASH) born. Emerging in concept around 2010 (King, et al., 2014) and in practice from 2011 onwards (Dunne and Finalay, 2016), by 2013 an estimated more than two-thirds of authorities had some form of multi-agency safeguarding models in place; albeit at that embryonic time often comprising no more than two partners (Home Office, 2014). It is this position that vulnerable adult and child safeguarding finds itself today, with a broad spectrum of agencies all sharing office space. This has been found by numerous studies to be beneficial in many respects, including: inter-agency understanding and empathy; more focus on the victims over individual agency priorities or politics; a joined-up approach to ‘problem families’ as a whole rather than as constituent individuals; less opportunity for victims to be overlooked; better information sharing across differing IT infrastructure; and improved outcomes in terms of reduced re-offending rates (Banks, et al., 2008) (Fyson and Kitson, 2012) (King, et al., 2014) (Robinson, 2005). The MASH would seem to be therefore an unequivocal success. There are however failings identified, stemming from the fact that each agency retains its own policies, practices and procedures and there is a lack of common governance (Shorrock, et al., 2019). There is also a concern around either real or inferred power struggles regarding both information knowledge and cultural traditions stemming from powers to act (Reeves, 2012).

**Community policing**

Safeguarding is not the only arena in which the police are both expected and required to work collaboratively, even if it is currently perhaps the most prominent. Community (or neighbourhood) policing is another area in which the police must respond in a plural fashion. It is also one which is often linked to the same complex safeguarding issues such
as the cases of Ebrahimi or Pilkington mentioned above. Although partnerships may have grown organically, legislation formalised this need in the same manner it did for safeguarding. Former British Prime Minister Tony Blair’s flagship Crime and Disorder Act, 1998 laid the groundwork for this, introducing the idea of ‘Crime and Disorder Partnerships’, placing on identified agencies a ‘duty to do all they reasonably can to prevent crime and disorder on their area’ (Crime and Disorder Act, 1998). The Home Office is a clear and unequivocal advocate of a multi-agency approach to resolving community issues, as this paragraph from its formal guidance outlines:

‘To tackle these issues associated with community safety requires a response that involves more than one agency. Each of these agencies collects information that relates to certain community safety problems, so in order for these problems to be understood it requires each agency to share this information. If a certain problem is only considered from the view of a single agency then key aspects of the problem can be missed, the problem can be poorly understood or even misunderstood, resulting in decisions being made on little substance, and ineffective responses being deployed.’ (Home Office, 2010).

It is clear that the same concerns that have driven the increasing collaboration of safeguarding agencies are encouraging the same growth in the community problem-solving arena. Information is perceived to be power to ‘fix’ issues, and different agencies hold different information. Freedom of Information requests sent to all territorial police forces in England (excluding the City of London) demonstrated the level of close inter-agency working relationships within this environment (see Table 1).

It can be seen from this chart that collaborative working arrangements within the specific sphere of neighbourhood policing are not as far advanced, without such bespoke partnership working arrangements such that exist within the safeguarding arena. Whilst forces are expected to comply with requirements under the Crime and Disorder Act, 1998 to form ‘Crime and Disorder Partnerships’ (thereby explaining the ubiquitous ‘yes’ value to participating in multi-agency meetings), many forces do not go above this baseline. The modal value for the frequency of these meetings is monthly; suggesting that more complex ASB issues face substantial waiting periods for the more formalised multi-agency resolution. This in itself could provide a strong argument for Hope’s (2014) ‘ineffective’ response, at least to community policing issues.

Permanent co-location of services in a community policing aspect remains the exception. 16 of the 24 responding forces (two-thirds) did confirm they have such an arrangement which was typically with local council services. However, of these positives, four confirmed that co-location existed in just one location within their force area. A further force (Gloucestershire) stated that the arrangement was more simplistic: that the building was a community hub facility they had space in, rather than specific partnership working. This leaves just 11 of the 24 respondents (46%) having two or more permanent joint working facilities. Contrast this to MASH’s where there is 100% participation. The mean length of time of their existence however (2013) indicates that this principle has broadly been in existence longer than the MASH.

This could indicate that police forces are more inclined to view community-related concerns as a lower priority than safeguarding. This may well be supported by the adverse news coverage provided to safeguarding failings, such as that from the recent tragic death
of Arthur Labinjo-Hughes (Rawlinson, 2021), in comparison to community failings that are most often relegated to inside pages of local newspapers (Coleman, 2018). Deaths and serious injuries from safeguarding-related incidents are thus more likely to be ‘critical incidents’, checking more boxes on the Critical Incident Matrix (College of Policing, 2021a). Police chiefs are accordingly much more likely to be willing to second permanent resources to approaches aimed at preventing such cases than in the arena of

Table 1. FOI responses to the questions. 1. What regular, formal multi-agency meetings take place to address neighbourhood policing issues within each council borough policed by yourselves? 2. How often do they take place? 3. Do you have any co-location of services in a neighbourhood policing context (e.g. share building space with other (non-policing) services aimed at improving local neighbourhoods)? 4. If it is possible, can you please tell me when this co-location began?

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Force</th>
<th>Regular community focused multi-agency meetings?</th>
<th>Frequency</th>
<th>Co-location of community policing based services?</th>
<th>If yes, since when?</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Avon and Somerset</td>
<td>Yes</td>
<td>Weekly</td>
<td>Yes</td>
<td>1998?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Bedfordshire</td>
<td>Yes</td>
<td>Quarterly</td>
<td>Yes</td>
<td>2016</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Cambridgeshire</td>
<td>Yes</td>
<td>Monthly</td>
<td>Yes</td>
<td>2011</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Cheshire</td>
<td>Yes</td>
<td>—</td>
<td>Yes</td>
<td>2017 (?)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Cleveland</td>
<td>Yes</td>
<td>More regular</td>
<td>Yes</td>
<td>2019</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Cumbria</td>
<td>Yes</td>
<td>—</td>
<td>Yes</td>
<td>2019</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Derbyshire</td>
<td>Yes</td>
<td>Weekly</td>
<td>No</td>
<td>2022?</td>
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<tr>
<td>Dorset</td>
<td>Yes</td>
<td>Monthly</td>
<td>Yes</td>
<td>2010</td>
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<tr>
<td>Durham</td>
<td>Yes</td>
<td>—</td>
<td>Yes</td>
<td>2011 (?)</td>
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<tr>
<td>Gloucestershire</td>
<td>Yes</td>
<td>Monthly</td>
<td>Yes</td>
<td>2014</td>
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<tr>
<td>Hampshire</td>
<td>Yes</td>
<td>—</td>
<td>—</td>
<td>—</td>
</tr>
<tr>
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<td>Yes</td>
<td>Quarterly</td>
<td>Yes</td>
<td>—</td>
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<tr>
<td>Humberside</td>
<td>Yes</td>
<td>Monthly</td>
<td>—</td>
<td>—</td>
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<tr>
<td>Lancashire</td>
<td>Yes</td>
<td>Monthly</td>
<td>No</td>
<td>—</td>
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<tr>
<td>Lincolnshire</td>
<td>Yes</td>
<td>Monthly</td>
<td>Yes</td>
<td>2019</td>
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<td>Norfolk</td>
<td>Yes</td>
<td>Weekly</td>
<td>Yes</td>
<td>2010</td>
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<tr>
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<td>Yes</td>
<td>—</td>
<td>Yes</td>
<td>2003</td>
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<td>Staffordshire</td>
<td>Yes</td>
<td>More regular</td>
<td>Yes</td>
<td>2016</td>
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<tr>
<td>Suffolk</td>
<td>Yes</td>
<td>Monthly</td>
<td>No</td>
<td>—</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Surrey</td>
<td>Yes</td>
<td>Monthly</td>
<td>Yes</td>
<td>2012</td>
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<tr>
<td>Sussex</td>
<td>Yes</td>
<td>Monthly</td>
<td>Yes</td>
<td>2013</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Warwickshire</td>
<td>Yes</td>
<td>—</td>
<td>No</td>
<td>—</td>
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<tr>
<td>West Mercia</td>
<td>Yes</td>
<td>Fortnightly</td>
<td>No</td>
<td>—</td>
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<tr>
<td>West Midlands</td>
<td>Yes</td>
<td>—</td>
<td>No</td>
<td>2013</td>
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<tr>
<td>West Yorkshire</td>
<td>Yes</td>
<td>Monthly</td>
<td>Yes</td>
<td>2015</td>
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<tr>
<td>Wiltshire</td>
<td>Yes</td>
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neighbourhood policing, where adverse negative headlines are far less likely. Safeguarding issues identified for improvement concerning children are also likely to present an even more tantalising opportunity for senior officers relating to partnership working, even for purely financial reasons. The theory of Adverse Childhood Experiences (ACEs) shows that if children are left in abusive, neglected or unsafe environments, they are significantly more likely to grow up to be the causes of these same issues themselves (Felitti, et al., 1998).

One notable exception to the potentially secondary role of multi-agency community working, and from which certain aspects of the Anti-social Behaviour, Crime and Policing Act, 2014 even take their name, is the Nottingham City Community Protection partnership (hereafter the ‘Nottingham Model’). Established in late 2003, the partnership saw various branches of council neighbourhood services including trading standards, environmental health, housing, parking enforcement, CCTV and ASB teams working within police stations alongside the newly instituted PCSO’s and neighbourhood police officers (Nottingham City Council Community Protection, n.d.). This pioneering multi-agency approach was intended to provide a holistic response to crime prevention. Some examples include looking to remove beggars off the streets by offering them support and housing, or offering drug rehabilitation or mental health programmes to those needing them in an effort to prevent recourse to criminality. (Holmes, 2021: pp. 149–150). The ‘Nottingham Model’ has been replicated by neighbouring areas such as Derby City, Mansfield and Ashfield District Councils. There is only one known study into its efficacy, which concludes that Nottinghamshire Police and Nottingham City Council view the arrangement’s benefits from opposing positions (Cashmore, 2017), but regardless of this there are notable examples of pioneering collaborative successes involving the partnership. These include: the removal of New Psychoactive Substances from sale at the time they were legal as a result of joint working between police and trading standards (Blackburn, 2015: p. 1 and 3); and use of council neighbourhood wardens to assist in a hotspot policing initiative aimed at deterring burglaries in student areas, utilising the principle that a ‘soft’ uniformed presence is just as effective as warranted officers (Sherman, et al., 1989), (Nottinghamshire Police, 2019), (Barak, et al., 2016).

**Emergency response**

Even roles that may be considered a more traditional sphere of policing such as emergency response or firearms are not immune from collaborative working. Responses to emergencies or major incidents have always required significant multi-agency collaboration. Information sharing is once again highlighted as crucial if major incidents are to be resolved expeditiously and satisfactorily (Waring, et al., 2020). Indeed, failures around information sharing between blue-light agencies are of key concern in the Manchester Arena Bombing Inquiry (Kerslake, 2018). Counter-terrorism strategies, most notably Operation Plato (which calls for multi-agency collaboration in the event of a marauding terrorist attack (Kerslake, 2018)), and Operation Temperer (the deployment of armed forces personnel to domestic sites of strategic importance in the event of the terror threat being elevated to ‘critical’ (Gearson and Berry, 2021)), both rely heavily on multi-
agency solutions to counter rapidly evolving situations. The ‘Prevent’ strand of the government’s CONTEST counter-terrorism strategy involves a complex web of much less traditional (and sometimes unwilling (Barclay, 2011)) partners to identify and seek to de-radicalise extremists (H M Government, 2018). Legislation too mandates joined-up approaches to dealing with major incidents. The Civil Contingencies Act, 2004 outlines a statutory duty of collaboration in advance of, and in response to, large emergencies. A quango even exists to oversee collaborative blue-light responses to disasters in the form of the Joint Emergency Services Interoperability Protocols (JESIP). Initially just a temporary working party established to improve co-operation by emergency services in response to several major incident reviews, it has since gone on to become an organisation in its own right. It is stated aim is indeed to affect a ‘broader cultural change towards more joint working between services’ (JESIP, 2016).

A multi-agency response to major incidents can also be problematic for other reasons. van den Heuvel et al. (2012) concluded that within the context of high-pressure decision-making environments (specifically terrorist attacks) often a lack of a desire to face subsequent criticism meant that in some instances key decisions were simply not made. Instead, those expected to make crucial choices were occasionally seen to absolve themselves of the responsibility in favour of deflecting the burden onto another agency in what they term choice deferral. The implications here are significant that if there were no other agency, such deferrals could not happen. It does not preclude however decision delay or an expectation that someone else within the organisation make the decision.

Other front-line services collaborations relating to emergency response include mental health ‘triage’ cars, staffed by a police officer and an accredited mental health practitioner (AMHP). This partnership is designed to incorporate trained professionals into the ever-increasing requirement for a police response to mental health crises (College of Policing, 2015a). This co-response model has resulted in both significantly fewer detentions under S.136 Mental Health Act, 1983 and fewer arrests for criminal matters when the suspect is identified as having mental health–related concerns (Puntis, et al., 2018). Service user experience is also significantly improved (Puntis, et al., 2018).

In the current British policing model, uniformed emergency response officers are also the primary gateway into the multi-agency arena. Attending officers are required to complete safeguarding referrals at all incidents which may feature an element of vulnerability, in order to initiate this multi-agency response (College of Policing, 2021b) (College of Policing, 2015b). However, only 57.7% of these police referrals are even passed to social services and a mere 4.8% of them went on to have any direct input by a social worker (Ford, et al., 2020). Does this mean that response officers are those whom Hope (2014) identifies as being ineffective – in this instance at identifying and tackling vulnerabilities? In addressing this it is important to consider these statistics at more than face value. Compare these figures to the effectiveness of police intelligence. A 2003 study into the impact of the charity Crimestoppers, whose raison d’être is for the public to provide intelligence to the police about crime (Crimestoppers, n.d.), demonstrated that only 9% of ‘actionable reports’ (those sent to police intelligence units as having some value) resulted in a positive police outcome (Gresham, et al., 2003).
In this report, as with the safeguarding referrals, the importance is not in percentages. Within that 9% of calls, for example, were 55 individual reports that led to the arrest of a suspect for murder or attempted murder (Gresham, et al., 2003, pp. 7–8). The significance is not in the percentages, but in the individuals. Every report made to Crimestoppers, or safeguarding teams, helps to build up an intelligence picture, which only when it reaches a required level or critical mass can become actionable. The relevance here is that police officers are not experts in vulnerability and safeguarding, nor indeed should they be; they are however sharing information with those who are the experts. Social workers undergo several years of training to become experts, and thus the police responders are simply passing concerns onto those who are suitably trained to properly assess the information.

**Criminal investigation**

The sole remaining bastion of policing with a claim to be almost exclusively crime-related in nature is the divisions of the Criminal Investigation Department (CID) who deal with those offences outside the purview of the ‘Public Protection’ teams. Only those officers who deal with murder, stabbings and other serious violence as well as drugs supply can now realistically say they are solely dedicated to crime, and operate in what could be described as a singularly law-enforcement capacity. Even then, there is a requirement to manage threats to life concerns and protection of vulnerable witnesses requiring multi-agency approaches involving charity and statutory bodies (Dandurand and Farr, 2010) (Fleming, et al., 2006)

**Unification – A single agency safeguarding hub?**

Is there then, as Hope (2014) espouses, a need for the police to exist as an agency at all? If its remit is as amorphous, varied and far-reaching as it currently seems to be, it may be time for a rethink about what the landscape of our public services looks like. Indeed there seems to be an inexorable drive towards increasing levels of not only multi-agency working, but co-location of key services across a wide spectrum of areas. It could therefore appear logical to continue this increasing co-operation to the point of there no longer being separate organisations, in favour of one single body, as Hope (2014) advocates.

There could for instance be a single unified ‘Public Protection Agency’, akin in establishment to the MASH, but rather becoming a ‘SASH’ – Single Agency Safeguarding Hub. This may provide significant opportunities to resolve some of the issues in respect of governance and power imbalances (Shorrock, et al., 2019) (Reeves, 2012). Failures around information sharing (Ofsted, 2010) would be prevented because it would no longer have to be shared; all practitioners would have the same intelligence through using common computer systems. It may also increase knowledge and understanding amongst the newly united workforce, as well as seek to establish more firm definitions of key terms. The term ‘vulnerability’ itself even differs across agencies (Bartkowiak-Théron and Asquith, 2012).
It may well be however that actually this ‘SASH’ would do more harm than good. The success of the MARAC model is partly attributed to the engagement by victims with agencies other than the police, whose aim is solely to support them, rather than bring prosecutions against offenders (Robinson, 2004) (Robinson, 2005). The current multi-agency nature of the arrangements also allows for other interested parties such as charities to request a literal seat at the table; but if this were to be forgone in favour of a single unified body, such small but valuable partners may be lost in the restructuring. Reeves’ (2012) power imbalances would become considerable. Charities are already identified as fulfilling roles that should be undertaken by statutory bodies (Seddon, 2007), and the increasing centralisation of power into arrangements such as MARAC and MASH has also already marginalised some voluntary sector organisations. Such side-lining has been deemed to be detrimental to victims and groups advocating for their rights (Harvie and Manzi, 2011) (Robbins, et al., 2014).

There is unlikely to be significant victim or witness co-operation with an agency who were responsible for ensuring the welfare and rights of the victims, as well as concurrently prosecuting the offender. This would almost certainly herald a reduction in co-operation from victims, countering the hard-won increase in the early days of the MARAC (Robinson, 2004) (Robinson, 2005). All the evidence thus far cited concludes that the welfare of the victim needs to stand distinctly apart from the pursuit of the offender. The two strands of public protection are not mutually exclusive: victims should not be required to co-operate with a prosecution to be safeguarded. This becomes even more blurred in the context of child or vulnerable adult offending, where persons subject to exploitation may simultaneously be both victim and offender (Windle, et al., 2020). In such instances diversionary activities and safeguarding is held to be of far greater importance than criminal prosecution (Shaw and Greenhow, 2020). If one agency was simultaneously responsible for attempting to safeguard and prosecute them, co-operation with the safeguarding aspect would surely be near non-existent.

The need to maintain a distinct separation between prevention and detection would seem to be an insurmountable problem for any desire to create a ‘SASH’, unless the prosecution aspect remained with an external organisation. This still allows for an amalgam of the diverse professionals with their wide range of powers into one sole agency with a responsibility for safeguarding. Prosecutions could remain in the hands of a separate entity but whom still maintain close working co-operation with the ‘SASH’. It is difficult though to see how this differs significantly from the current status quo. It also opens up significant further questions as to how and by whom referrals would be made into this new agency, and how actions outside the scope of its powers would be taken out. Existing agencies not incorporated into this new body would, as demonstrated above, naturally become excluded from its problem-solving, thereby potentially isolating bespoken support networks and disenfranchising some, mostly minority victims, who already face such issues within the safeguarding arena (Bernard and Harris, 2016). This obstacle would no doubt necessitate additional partnership working, thereby entirely negating the point of attempting to unify into a single agency.
Unification – ‘community protection’

In the other core multi-agency arena of community policing, some form of expanded ‘Community Protection’ department, building on the ‘Nottingham Model’, could be rolled out countrywide without significant upheaval. A single organisation could transcend current politics which dictate ‘noise’-related ASB to be an environmental health issue; dog fouling to be a street-cleansing issue; underage alcohol or knife sales to be a trading standards issue; and parking contraventions to be a council issue; but which public perception all see as a police issue (Ipsos, 2012). Certainly there are benefits to the ‘Nottingham Model’ of having uniformed omni-competent council wardens patrolling areas commensurate with policing beat areas to deal with civil issues such as those listed above. Their uniforms being strikingly similar to those of police officers cannot be coincidence; no doubt the increased visibility of a uniformed presence on the streets helps impact on hotspot deterrent policing (Barak, et al., 2016) as well as reactive policing, such as helping locate wanted persons (Sandeman, 2018).

The Nottingham ‘Community Protection Officers’ (CPO’s) are equipped with police radios and are available to be dispatched to incidents by the police control room. This negates information sharing delay as calls for service to the police – but which relate to council issues – can be immediately resourced (Cashmore, 2017). Their role in relation to ASB has considerable overlap with that of a PCSO but they lack any power of detention, policy even preventing common law powers of citizen’s arrest (Nottingham City Council, 2017). They are able to deal with parking offences and similar minor civil infractions such as fly-tipping, wheelie-bin contraventions and dog fouling by means of fixed penalty notices, and are also able to issue prohibitive Community Protection Notices (so-named after the Nottingham scheme) under the Anti-social Behaviour, Crime and Policing Act, 2014. Such a role is necessary because of the division of power between the police enforcing criminal law and the council bearing responsibility for civil offences. A unified ‘community protection’ agency could combine the roles of these patrolling council officials with that of PCSO’s, and perhaps even community police officers. A large part of community policing is directed at neighbourhood problem-solving which does not require a warranted officer (Ferrandino, 2013). A hybrid CPO/PCSO role with powers to tackle what are currently low-level ‘policing’ issues, a short power of detention and authorisation to deal with civil offences could simultaneously reduce duplication of roles and increase visibility. Any enforcement action could then be referred on to warranted police officers through information sharing arrangements.

Therein however is identified the stumbling block. The issuing of lower level sanctions relies on the threat of enforcement action against breaches, or the ability to escalate outcomes in the face of officer-perceived non-compliance (Coates, et al., 2009) based on their professional experience and use of discretion (Lipsky, 1980). Even entirely civil legislation such as the Housing Act, 1996 contains clauses that stipulate breaches of injunctions are arrestable (by the police) under contempt of court powers. Such abilities to arrest those who fail or are perceived as unlikely to abide by fixed penalty notices would be essential for the model to work. If the enforcers remained separate from the community officers, there still remains the issue of information sharing; the root cause of so many
multi-agency failings (Ofsted, 2010). If the enforcement side were brought in-house into the community protection agency, that too presents issues. Practitioners would be required to be omni-competent: able to deal with the low-level issues and also the more serious matters. There would therefore still exist a multi-tiered structure comprising the ground-level operatives requesting assistance from those more empowered in the event of more serious offending; a relationship identical in essence to that already existing between police officers and PCSO’s. Front-line officers would need to have the skills and experience to decide on the most suitable disposal option based on expected suspect compliance, in line with Coates et al. (2009). What too would be the consequences of such a move, to police legitimacy; that fragile and intangible notion of ‘policing by consent’. A removal of police officers from the ‘softer’ ‘friendlier’ public-facing aspects of policing such as attending community events or conducting foot patrol could have huge consequences on how they are perceived and trusted by the public (Myhill and Quinton, 2011) (Peyton, et al., 2019). Conversely, an increased ability to respond more effectively and holistically to ASB concerns could in fact increase legitimacy (Innes and Weston, 2010).

One possible solution is to expand the powers and abilities of PCSO’s to include those currently held by the Community Protection Officers in the ‘Nottingham model’, by providing them with the ability to tackle low-level civil matters such as parking, fly-tipping and noise nuisance. Funding re-allocated from councils, who presently take primacy for these issues, could present a very simple and easily enacted method by which to increase public confidence in both the police and local government. Increased funding and powers in this regard would provide additional staffing to police and a more far-reaching ability to deal with ASB concerns at first point of call. When incidents broadly relating to ASB accounts for nearly half of all calls to the police (Innes and Weston, 2010), and over 50% of these are repeat callers (Ipsos, 2012), the potential efficiencies are plain to see. It is crucial to note that arguably the most positive model for increasing effectiveness is not merging agencies, but in fact transferring additional powers to the police to enable them to deal with what an overwhelming percentage of the population see as a policing problem (Ipsos, 2012). Concerns around ASB are largely an enforcement issue. Perhaps this is one of the key reasons why Hope (2014) singles out uniformed front-line officers particularly for criticism as being ineffective: simply because many of the roles society expects them to fulfil are not in fact within their legal remit.

There are significant overlaps between community policing and safeguarding, as the aforementioned cases such of Bijan Ebrahimi (McCallum, 2017) and Fiona Pilkington (Independent Police Complaints Commission, 2009) demonstrate. Both cases related to significant safeguarding concerns, as well as ongoing neighbourhood-related issues; they just both primarily fell to the neighbourhood officers to deal with. Again this demonstrates the fact that multi-agency working is inescapable. Even with a united ‘SASH’ and increased policing powers or some form of enhanced ‘community protection’ organisation, the two would still need to share information in order to deal with the most vulnerable in society. This would also apply equally to radicalisation concerns around terrorism, which again prey on the most vulnerable (Oppetit, et al., 2019).
Unification – A single agency emergency response service

Having a bespoke united ‘major incident response agency’ would be the most problematic. Major incidents requiring significant resources are thankfully rare, with an average of only three-to-four a year. (Carley, et al., 1998). To have significant numbers of personnel on standby simply waiting for such an incident would present an inexcusable waste of resources; especially considering the high level of training required. Practitioners in this united agency would be required to be trained to the level of counter-terrorism specialist firearms officers, advanced trauma paramedics and specialist search and rescue including floods, mountains and urban, and be required to switch seamlessly from one function to another. Not least of the concerns would be where such a team were based. The current multi-agency response, relying on a wide range of charity organisations and statutory bodies, each with their own area of expertise and specialism seems to present by far the best solution.

There is an option to combine the roles of chief officers across emergency response services, or have a combined chief with disparate deputies overseeing each different service, with the commander arranging unified policy and governance. There has been a step towards this with the recent co-location of senior staff and several back office functions with fire and rescue services in several police forces including Derbyshire and Nottinghamshire (Marriott, 2022), (Derbyshire Times, 2016). Whilst this has led to some joint working initiatives and shared operational resources (Derbyshire Police, 2019) (Spridgeon, 2021), the agencies remain distinctly separate with differing responsibilities. Unification at a senior operational or oversight level is possible though, as evidenced by the recent expansion of Her Majesty’s Inspectorate of Constabulary, to include assessments of fire and rescue services (HMICFRS, 2021). Governance is also becoming more unified with some locally elected Police and Crime Commissioners also now taking on responsibility for fire and rescue services, such as the case in the county of North Yorkshire (North Yorkshire PFCC, n.d.). There is then potentially scope for further unification in this vein, but this still prohibits ‘giving up the police’, at least at the practitioner level. In support of this, there has been some local experimentation at unification, with a trial of a ‘Police and Fire Community Support Officer’ by Wiltshire Police (Huggins, 2018). The intent of the trial was that ‘whilst their core role remains as a PCSO, they also carry a fire pager whilst on duty, allowing them to respond to fire calls as required within their locality area’. Tellingly, in spite of an assurance at the launch of the pilot project for a follow-up analysis at its conclusion (Huggins, 2018), no such document is in existence. Similarly, the ‘PFCSO’ abbreviation disappears from any other official documentation outside of the trial’s time frame. It must therefore be concluded that the experiment was either abandoned, unsuccessful or both. The issues of additional training, conflicting interests and priorities, alongside the standard expectation that with more responsibilities comes higher pay, no doubt presented a significant obstruction to the long-term success of this initiative.

The mental health ‘triage car’ was the last area of partnership working considered, and it is here that there is perhaps the strongest argument for a more unified approach. Studies into existing co-response ‘street triage’ models featuring an AMHP and police officer
demonstrate that service users faced additional trauma with the police having been present (Brown, 2016). When that was the case there was often a move towards dealing with the matter criminally, rather than a health concern (Puntis, et al., 2018). There were benefits too, primarily relating to the increased speed of referrals to more suitable services, rather than a need for detention and evaluation in a mental health facility under Sec. 136 Mental Health Act, 1983, and the subsequent reduction in such detentions (Puntis, et al., 2018). It is clear that the rapid response of the trained AMHP is bringing significant benefits where the presence of the police is still causing harm. The logical conclusion therefore is to create a bespoke ‘emergency mental health response team’ (EMHRT). With such significant levels of demand on the police around mental health of up to 40% of all calls (College of Policing, 2015a), and a further 11% of total calls to the ambulance service relating to mental health or self-harm (Duncan, et al., 2019) there is clearly sufficient requirement for this service. Creating a bespoke EMHRT with trained AMHPs and perhaps a paramedic to deal with self-harm or overdose issues, and empowering such a service with a power akin to Sec. 136 would create a significantly enhanced body for both service user experience (by removing the associated criminal stigmatisation) and reduce demand on in-patient detentions. Training in conflict management and unarmed defence tactics for their and the subject’s safety could be incorporated, as could negotiation training such as that provided specialist police officers. Whether there is the political will, or perhaps more importantly the funding for this, is perhaps the biggest hurdle. This certainly seems to present the best opportunity identified to ‘give up the police’ however.

Conclusion

The aim of this article was to consider whether the traditional notion of ‘the British police’ as a standalone force of law and order still held true in a modern world dominated by plural problem-solving approaches (Crawford, et al., 2005). It has been demonstrated that the principles on which the police were founded, namely one police officer patrolling one beat area solely to deter and detect criminality, is certainly no longer the reality. Instead, policing in the 21st century puts ‘vulnerability’ front and centre, especially in the contexts of safeguarding and community policing. Ever-increasing multi-agency approaches exist in the more traditional ‘crime-fighting’ arenas of British policing too. Such collaboration is continually becoming more based on co-location of services to ensure the greatest possible level of information sharing, most notably in regards to safeguarding functions.

With this being the case, it was discussed whether it was perhaps time to consider the abandonment of ‘the police’, ‘social services’, ‘probation’ and other such bodies as standalone entities. In spite of the considerable multi-agency ‘grey areas’ around vulnerability, safeguarding and community protection, it was shown that there was still a need to maintain these agencies as independent functions; especially to ensure the dichotomy between prosecution and safeguarding.

Hope (2014) concluded his article by opining that the ‘uniformed police service should merge thoroughly with the community health, ambulance and fire services to become a harm-response service with the delegated task of protecting and offering succour to the victims of crime’. It has been demonstrated how this is simply not possible, and Hope’s
comments perhaps show an over-simplification of what it is that the police and the other agencies do, having not necessarily addressed the less visible functions of these agencies, the vast array of their specific functions, or their finite legal remit in detail.

His suggestion of a unified ‘harm-response service’ though is perhaps not as far removed as it may at first appear; but solely in the specific arena of emergency mental health response. It is Hoped (pun intended) that serious discussion can be instigated around the need to remove the police from this process to the greatest extent possible, in order to provide the maximum benefit to both service users and public bodies. Further research into this possibility is strongly suggested. It has been demonstrated that mental health response is quite likely the only arena where such unification of services currently provided by diverse agencies into just one singular agency could be reasonably practicable.

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