

SCRUTINISING PERFORMANCE

INSPECTION OF COMPLAINTS

Background

The Professional Standards Committee (PSC) regularly meets (4 to 6 times a year) to inspect the complaints register within the Professional Standards Department (PSD) of Sussex Police. Those meetings have evolved into discussions, involving the Head of Professional Standards Department, which have directly led to changes in procedure, or the reminding of officers of the need to adhere to Force policy in their dealings with the public.

It was generally accepted that those meetings, whilst useful, frequently lacked specific focus as the procedure was that the type of complaints that were looked at were randomly selected, meaning that they were often of a varied nature. This meant that the outcomes of those discussions were generally broad and not routinely captured formally for future reference, meaning that outcomes were less easy to measure and monitor.

At the meeting in December 2009, the Committee also felt that the way that members approached the inspection of complaints needed to be refocused to ensure that it became the key to all scrutinising performance of Professional Standards and setting strategic direction for the way the Force dealt with the public and improving particularly the service to the public of Sussex.

The Authority adding value

The Committee changed the way that complaints were selected. The previous arrangement whereby the Chairman of PSC was asked to select a defined amount of files from a completely random basis was altered. The PSC instead have adopted a process where 50% of the files that are inspected focus on risk based themes, allowing for the random selection of complaints from a related category. This has allowed for a much more focused debate, which commences with a verbal briefing from the Head of PSC around the context of the category and lessons learnt from previous complaints.

Previously the inspection of complaints happened immediately before a meeting of the PSC, meaning that the discussions that were had at the inspection meeting were not carried forward into the Committee and actions were less easily recorded. The Committee decoupled the inspection of complaints from their meeting schedule, therefore allowing for their findings at the inspections to be captured in a report to the full committee with indications of how the Force would have responded to the concerns raised by members.

These changes have increased the focus and efficiency of the Inspection of Complaints Register meetings. The themed approach has allowed the Committee to respond to particular high risks areas, and for further understanding within the Authority of the types of complaints against officers and staff. However, this process has not been the end of the continuous improvement of the Committee as the PSC has also undertaken training in January 2010 to cover specific areas, particularly for new members of the Committee and to generally enhance members' understanding of the processes

within PSD and the role of the IPCC. On 27 January 2010 members and officers delivered a training session for the Committee, with presentations by PSD which covered such matters as the legal requirements for PSD, its role, and the way that complaints are processed. The Committee have now established a format for the way that the inspection of complaints is run, which includes members setting the theme for the inspection, generally based upon risk. The Committee now has a particular focus on Pledge Point 10, ensuring that complaints are acknowledged within twenty-four hours and that the complainant understands how the process would work and there is a contract between Sussex Police and the complainant relating to the investigation of the complaint.

The Committee now completes an inspection records form for each file that they inspect, and this is used to record the Committee's findings and to put together a report for PSD. The Committee also continues to randomly select a number of files to ensure that it is not just focused on a theme on each occasion. Members will focus on one file at each meeting to ensure a specific focus and this file can then be called at each subsequent inspection so that members can be satisfied that the process has arrived at a satisfactory conclusion.

Outcome

This improved process now means that members are more able to undertake effective scrutiny of the PSD at its inspection and there is now a clear link to the Committee and their findings. The Committee have identified a number of matters which have had a direct impact on the way Sussex Police approaches the business; for example, the Committee identified that there was inappropriate use of police vehicles occurring on occasion where officers would be collected whilst off duty and returned to the police station. The Committee asked for this to be addressed and an announcement was then placed in Routine Orders to all officers reminding them of the Force policy in this regard and the subsequent implications for breach of that policy. Reports of this nature have now ceased and there is no longer inappropriate use of police vehicles.

The Committee also identified a problem relating to a CCTV blind-spot within Crawley Custody Centre. The Committee are now pursuing this with the Head of Custody and the Authority's Lead Member for Independent Custody Visiting by visiting Crawley Custody Centre and subsequently reporting their findings through to the PSC at its next meeting. The Committee are clear that they wish to reassure the public that they take this risk very seriously and will want to be reassured that the CCTV coverage there is thorough and meets the safety needs of the public and staff within the suite.

The Committee remain considerably concerned that there are ongoing delays with the IPCC in dealing with appeals. The impact of this is that the public are not dealt with in a timely manner and the case-loads within PSD are ever increasing. The Committee are determined that this needs to be resolved and have played their part by writing to the South East Commissioner at the IPCC, asking for a written explanation to the delay. The Commissioner is routinely invited to attend meetings of the PSC and this has improved the relationship with Sussex Police and the IPCC over a number of years. The South East Commissioner has acknowledged the concerns of the Committee and is seeking to make a full response in the next few weeks.

The Committee is now fully focused on protecting the very best interests of the public, through oversight of complaints, Independent Custody Visiting and CCTV Monitoring.

Contacts:

Peter Bratton
Chairman of Professional Standards Committee

Dinah Longden,
Policy Officer, Sussex Police Authority

Cliff Parrott
Temporary Chief Superintendent, Head of PSD, Sussex Police