



RESEARCH FINDINGS

Local Resolution: The Views of Police Officers and Complainants

Tiggey May, Mike Hough, Victoria Herrington and Hamish Warburton

Institute for Criminal Policy Research
School of Law, King's College London

Some complaints about the police are of such a serious nature that independent investigation is vital to ensure public confidence. Most complaints, however, involve incidents of incivility, impoliteness or intolerance. These complaints are dealt with at a local force or basic command unit level using the Local Resolution (LR) process. LR involves 'solving, explaining, clearing up or settling a matter with a complainant' (IPCC, 2005: 24) and is intended to provide a proportionate and timely response in the interests of both officers and complainants. The process gives police officers the opportunity to explain and justify their actions, and apologise if appropriate, and gives complainants the chance to air their feelings directly to the police. In 2005/06 there were 40,384 allegations of wrong doing made against the police and 46 per cent of these were locally resolved (IPCC 2006: v). The process is overseen by the Independent Police Complaints Commission (IPCC).

The Report

The report examines officers' and complainants' views of the LR process and documents ideas implemented by Cleveland and West Mercia police, aimed at improving officer and complainant understanding and satisfaction with LR. In Cleveland we examined the use of *officer information leaflets*. In West Mercia our work examined the position of the *Divisional Liaison Officer* (DLO); a role providing officers with support and advice on resolving complaints locally; as well as the provision of *information*

leaflets for officers and complainants. The research draws on interviews with 76 officers and 64 complainants. These data were complemented with observations and interviews with police managers.

If the public judge the police by their ability to be able to complain and receive a satisfactory response, this research suggests that the LR process is central to improving local accountability.

Key findings:

- Few complainants knew anything about the LR process before complaining.
- Some complainants said that LR was presented to them as their only option in terms of resolving their complaint.
- Complainants were satisfied with the investigating officer, but not with the process, often because it failed to deliver what many wanted - an apology.
- Officers were ill informed about LR and generally cynical about its operation.
- Officers were satisfied with the investigating officers but tended to feel the process was biased towards complainants.
- Many officers were unaware how their complaint had been finalised.
- A greater number of officers were dissatisfied with the end result than were satisfied.
- For the Divisional Liaison role to be effective in the provision of advice, training and independence, the position needs proper resourcing, training and support.
- Despite improving officer understanding of the process the information leaflet had no impact on officer satisfaction.
- Amongst complainants who saw the information leaflet there was a slight improvement in satisfaction with the process.

The Findings

The research suggests that LR has the potential for dealing effectively with low level complaints, but it is not always being used to its full potential. Complainants should be better informed about the process and the options open to them. Communicating the final outcome of their complaint should be

handled with more sensitivity and flexibility. Officers also need better training about the LR process. There was some limited evidence to suggest that Divisional Liaison Officers may improve the overall quality of the process. The Police Federation also have an important role to play in changing workforce attitudes to the complaints process.

Improving complainant satisfaction with Local Resolution

One of the hardest elements to manage within the system is complainant expectations. Most people initiate complaints with little understanding of the process and sometimes have unrealistic expectations. Investigating officers should try to provide complainants with realistic expectations, as overall satisfaction may depend on how far a complainant's consent is based on an understanding of what the process can and cannot deliver. Complainants must also understand the formal nature of LR and that it is overseen by the IPCC. To further maximise the chances of successful outcomes, LR documentation could include a checklist to which both complainants and police supervisors commit to at the start of the process. A checklist could include:

- A brief statement about the purpose of LR
- An acceptance that the officer will not be disciplined
- An agreement that the complaint may be used for training purposes
- An agreement about how and when the complainant will be informed about the progress of their complaint
- An agreement about how the outcome will be communicated to the complainant
- A statement informing complainants that they can appeal to the IPCC if they are dissatisfied with the LR *process*, but not the *outcome*.

Improving officer understanding and satisfaction with Local Resolution

Improving officer understanding of and confidence in the LR process is vital if officers are to view it as a fair and transparent process. Over half the front-line staff interviewed said they had received no LR training, and few were able to provide an accurate account of its aims. This suggests a need for redesigning the style and content of training. PSDs must communicate the philosophy that underpins the system, including the desire to move away from blame-centred processes. Training initiatives should include challenging misconceptions about the process and about complainants; raising awareness of the aims of LR; consolidating knowledge about where LR information is held; improving officer understanding of the benefits of the system for individual officers and the police service as a whole and ensuring that officers are aware that the process is not about apportioning blame. Improving officer satisfaction in the process could also be achieved through:

- Agreeing, at the start of the process, the frequency of communication between the investigating officer and the officer complained about
- Informing all officers about the outcome of their complaint, either by letter or email
- Providing officers with a copy of the final letter sent to the complainant

Complaint advisers

Practical considerations, such as the travelling time complaint advisers may have to undertake, may prove critical when deciding whether or not such a position is workable. Another issue is whether nominating individual advisers will have the effect of de-skilling other officers in terms of handling LR. To mitigate this risk, as well as provide support and advice to supervisors

and operational officers, complaint advisers should train divisional officers, thus increasing the number of officers skilled in complaint handling. PSDs should provide ongoing training to support the role. Time should be made available to advisers for associated administrative duties, or civilian support should be considered.

The role of the Police Federation

Many officers noted the importance of Police Federation representatives in the LR process. If PSDs aim to change officer attitudes, Police Federation support is essential. If the positive role played by the Federation in our fieldwork sites is replicated elsewhere, Police Federation representatives should be encouraged to assist PSDs in developing, and potentially delivering, training and innovation. All stakeholders in the process, however, must remain sensitive to the risks involved with seeking Federation support as 'change agents' in the complaints process; there are inevitably tensions between the public interest and the interests of Federation membership.

The IPCC guardianship role

To succeed, LR must be locally owned by forces. The IPCC should support PSDs by disseminating good practice, offering guidance, assisting with training operational officers and supervisors and monitoring force performance. The IPCC should also support PSDs in managing complainant expectations and improving the transparency of the process. LR must be factored in at all stages of the proposed modernisation of the complaints and discipline system as it will be fundamental in changing officer and complainant attitudes, and moving from an adversarial system to one focused on improvement.

The Police Foundation is the only independent charitable organisation focussed entirely on developing knowledge and understanding of policing and challenging the police service and government to improve policing for the benefit of the public. The Police Foundation is a bridge between the police service, the government and the public, while being owned by none of them. Find out more about us at www.police-foundation.org.uk

The **Independent Police Complaints Commission** is the independent organisation with the job of making sure that complaints against the police are dealt with effectively. We set standards for the way the police handle complaints and, when something has gone wrong, we help the police learn lessons and improve the way they work. Find out more about us at www.ipcc.gov.uk

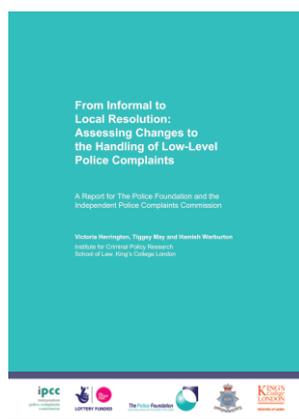
Tiggey May is a Senior Research Fellow at the Institute for Criminal Policy Research, King's College London, where **Mike Hough** is Director and Professor of Criminal Policy.

The **Institute for Criminal Policy Research** carries out multi-disciplinary research into crime and the criminal justice system. The Institute produces work which is independent, and objective and of the highest technical quality.

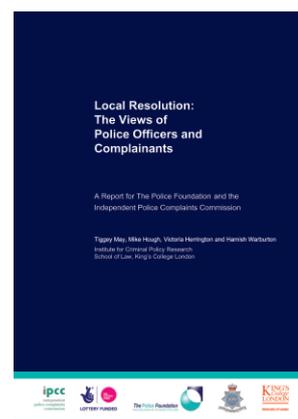
This is the third of three reports on the resolution of low level complaints against the police. This research was conducted on behalf of **The Police Foundation** and the **Independent Police Complaints Commission** and funded by the **Big Lottery Fund** and the **Independent Police Complaints Commission**.



© Police Foundation 2003
ISBN 0 947692 38 X



© Police Foundation/IPCC 2007
ISBN 0 947692 43 6



© Police Foundation/IPCC 2007
ISBN 0 947692 44 4



Independent Police Complaints Commission
90 High Holborn
London WC1V 6BH
Tel: 08452 002 002
e-mail: enquiries@ipcc.gsi.gov.uk

www.ipcc.gov.uk

The Police Foundation
Improving policing for the benefit of the public



The Police Foundation
First Floor, Park Place,
12 Lawn Lane, London SW8 1UD
Tel: 020 7582 3744

e-mail: sue.roberts@police-foundation.org.uk

www.police-foundation.org.uk