

Reviewing the Priority 44 Programme

A process evaluation of a Home Office crime reduction initiative

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Background

In late 2006, a group of 44 Community Safety Partnerships (CSPs) was identified as having the potential to make a significant contribution to the delivery of the then Home Office target (Public Service Agreement [PSA] 1) to reduce crime as measured by the British Crime Survey (BCS) by 15 per cent, comparing 2007/08 with the baseline year of 2002/03. The Home Office initiated a programme of work with these partnerships designed to maximise performance against the target, which became known as the Priority 44 Programme (P44). The initiative lasted until the end of the target period in March 2008.

This qualitative research study explored the perceptions of a sample of practitioners and policy makers involved in the management and execution of the Priority 44 Programme. It sought to understand key elements of the initiative and how they translated into 'action on the ground'; map the range and diversity of practitioners' perceptions of the initiative; and understand and explain

the reasons behind these perceptions in order to inform the development and implementation of future initiatives.¹

Sixty-one interviews were conducted with participants from three tiers of programme delivery: staff from 13 of the 44 partnerships involved in the initiative; regional Government Office (GO) or the Home Office Crime Team in Wales (HOCTiW) staff who were involved in delivering the initiative at a regional/Welsh level; and Home Office staff who were responsible for managing the initiative as a whole. The fieldwork was undertaken in 2008, after the initiative had concluded.

¹ This project is not an outcome evaluation and did not seek to determine whether or not P44 was effective in reducing crime. It is worth noting, by way of context, that the 15 per cent target was met; and that there were sizeable reductions in BCS comparator crime (a subset of police recorded crime data that most closely approximates those covered by the BCS) in P44 areas over the course of the initiative that undoubtedly contributed to the achievement of the target. However, more in-depth analysis would be required to judge the scale of any contribution P44 made to the reductions.

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Keywords

Community safety partnerships
Crime and disorder reduction partnerships
Crime reduction
Effective practice
Localism
Partnership working
Performance management
Process evaluation
Qualitative
Weeks of Action

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There has been a change of administration and several relevant major shifts in government policy that are relevant to this study since the interviews and analysis were carried out. Most notably, the government has announced an intention to abolish regional Government Offices, and signalled the end of routine, top down performance management of local areas by central government.

Overall perceptions of the Priority 44 Programme

The main objective of the Priority 44 Programme was generally well understood. There was less clarity and consistency of understanding about the rationale for the selection of the 44 areas. The understanding of some was in accordance with the rationale set out by the Home Office: to maximise performance in those areas with the greatest potential to influence the achievement of PSA 1. However, others interpreted the initiative as focusing specifically on poor performers and regarded inclusion, at least at the outset, as fundamentally negative.

At the start of P44, partnership staff demonstrated a wide spectrum of 'buy-in' – that is, they varied greatly in the degree to which they positively engaged with, and were willing to be, an active part of the initiative.

Higher levels of buy-in amongst partnership staff were associated with: greater understanding of the underlying rationale of the programme; acceptance of the reasons for their areas selection in the 44; willingness to be part of a centrally conceived and managed initiative; and a good perceived fit between P44 and the existing work of their partnership.

Buy-in to the initiative was not constant over time. Where it changed it was always described in positive terms: initial reservations were overcome and buy-in increased. Initial concerns about the way in which partnerships were selected diminished over time. Also, anxieties that partnership staff had identified at the outset in terms of the nature and purpose of the initiative were diminished once the actual agenda became clearer.

The Priority 44 Programme as an enabler of change: resources, structural change and analytic capacity

Organisational change was not perceived to be a main consequence of the Priority 44 Programme. Where people did ascribe organisational change to the initiative, they tended to do so in terms of how it facilitated (rather than instigated) changes in structure, priorities or allocation of resources to take place. It was said to have removed barriers to the implementation of existing plans, or to have made it easier to progress work that was already underway.

P44 was described as having affected funding or the use of resources in a variety of ways. Some understood the initiative to be primarily about working in a different way – targeting existing funds more judiciously – rather than acting as a stimulus to draw in additional resources. Others were able to use the lever of P44 to bring in resources from across the partnership in order to support crime reduction activity; and some described having felt encouraged by the initiative to target new sources of funding that they had not tapped before.

Focus, sharing practice and Weeks of Action: core elements of the Priority 44 Programme

The increased focus that the Priority 44 Programme gave to those involved was very widely thought to be both the most salient and the most successful aspect of the initiative.

Focus was not uniformly described. P44 was said to have engendered focus in quite diverse ways: through the emphasis of a single objective; by directing attention to a small number of local areas; and by enhanced scrutiny by GOs and central government of those areas.

The enhanced scrutiny of those areas designated as P44 was generally welcomed and felt to be motivational. However, a minority felt that P44 was unnecessary and that pursuit of the PSA 1 target and a desire to improve community safety were sufficient motivators in themselves.

There were various specific aspects of the initiative that contributed to the general impression of increased focus. The very fact of being identified and labelled as Priority 44 brought about an expectation of scrutiny; and this was then manifested through increased contact and questioning of partnerships, primarily from GO/HOCTiW staff. Interim targets and the requirement of regular reporting were further tangible contributions.

The general feeling was that, while there had been some successes in sharing effective practice between P44 partnerships that had come about through the initiative, it was not where the main strengths of the initiative lay.

The communication of examples of effective practice from the Home Office (primarily via the P44 newsletter) was felt to have been limited. There was some feeling that it improved towards the end of the initiative, but by this time the potential for it to have an impact on achievement of the PSA1 target had lessened.

The most notable single tactical success was perceived to be the implementation of Weeks of Action – periods of intensive and highly co-ordinated partnership action, usually focused on discrete high crime and high deprivation areas (such as a ward, neighbourhood or cluster of streets).

Weeks of Action were, on the whole, thought to have been effective in reducing BCS comparator crime – at least in the short term. They were also felt to have been successful in improving existing (or building new) relationships between the various partners who participated, and these improved relationships were said to carry over into other aspects of partnership working.

There was some less positive feeling toward Weeks of Action. It was widely thought to be a short-term approach to crime reduction; and although some thought that appropriate given the nature of the target, others had resisted carrying them out at the expense of longer-term priorities.

There were also other examples cited of GOs/HOCTiW being effective in encouraging cross-pollination of ideas through seminars, workshops and other means.

Perceptions of whether P44 had helped reduce crime

Participants commonly felt that P44 had been a factor – albeit one of a number of successful factors – in reducing their area's level of BCS comparator crime and the achievement of hitting the overall PSA 1 target. However, they did not feel confident about judging the size of the contribution of P44.

Feelings were more mixed about the longer-term sustainability of the reductions in recorded crime. Some saw a natural contradiction between how the short-term reductions in crime had been achieved – intensive, focused efforts – and the adoption of a longer-term, sustainable approach.

Others felt that some of the steps that had been taken in pursuit of supporting P44 could be channelled into longer term benefits. Examples given were: structural changes; the establishment of new partnership relationships; and improved ways of working, such as better performance management.