

‘Soft’ policing in rural Scotland

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Introduction

‘Soft’ policing is a strategy which borrows from concepts laid out by Nye (2004), who argues that nation states should adopt ‘soft power’ over ‘hard power’ in response to a range of geopolitical challenges. Soft policing as a concept sits under the reassurance and neighbourhood policing banners, where ‘police power is based less upon the direct enactment of coercion and rests instead upon a persuasive mode of social control’ (Innes, 2005: 157). Soft policing therefore focuses on the non-coercive elements of policing, where community engagement, situated knowledge and negotiated order maintenance play important roles in shaping the police response (Innes, 2005; McCarthy, 2014). Although critiqued for ‘obscuring the ‘hard’ realities of the ‘coercive state’’ (Loader & Walker, 2007: 76), soft policing styles are often synonymously linked to rural policing, with the common perception being that negotiated order maintenance tends to take precedence over enforcement policing styles in these environments (Donnermeyer & DeKeseredy, 2014; Wooff, 2015; Yarwood & Wooff, 2016). Rural environments, however, by their very nature tend to be isolated, complex and multifaceted, requiring a nuanced and context dependent policing response.

Given that rural policing remains at the margins of the policing literature (Mawby & Yarwood, 2011) and with the recent (re)emergence of discussions around ‘soft’ policing (see McCarthy, 2014), this paper provides a timely examination of the extent to which the concept is relevant in rural policing discussions. While cautious not to create a false dichotomy between ‘hard’ and ‘soft’ policing, in a practical sense the police routinely slip between tactics described as ‘soft’ and ‘hard’, philosophically it is useful to focus on the soft policing responses of officers in rural Scotland. The early 2000s witnessed the introduction of the National Reassurance

Policing Programme, essentially a rebranding which sought to embed policing at the local, multi-agency partnership level, with the aim of enhancing the legitimacy of the police (Innes, 2004; Millie & Herrington, 2005). Additionally, the proliferation of regulatory agencies means that the ‘soft’ policing moniker was bound together with the broadening rhetoric of ‘soft power’ and collective security. However, as Innes (2005: 165) notes ‘soft’ policing is difficult for the police to do, with ‘significant tensions’ between ‘harder’ policing roles and cultures apparent in the police. Additionally, significant critique has emerged from a policy context, which suggests that the widening ‘velvet glove’ of social control has been ratified through the soft policing agenda.

Yet, recent work by McCarthy (2014) has (re)focused the role of soft policing in the broader narrative of partnership working. This paper seeks inform these debates, highlighting that, primarily due to the rural context, some rural police officers are in a strong position to use soft policing tactics in response to anti-social behavior (ASB). However, the rural picture is complex and nuanced, and soft policing is less apparent in other rural environments. Thus a local, context dependent policing style is necessary¹. This is particularly important given that recent policing decisions taken in Scotland illustrate the complexity of balancing localism with the national policing agenda (Yarwood & Wooff, 2016). The paper begins by exploring the methodology employed within the study, before the concept of soft policing in the context of rural Scotland is discussed. The paper concludes by exploring what the implications of these findings are for Police Scotland, the national single police force in Scotland.

¹ This paper does not seek to make any direct comparisons to urban policing responses, but examine the extent to which the soft policing agenda helps describe policing responses experienced in two contrasting villages in rural Scotland. In addition to avoiding the hard/soft policing dichotomy, it is also important to also avoid false urban/rural binaries and fetishizing aspects of rural life.

Methodology

Data for this paper were collected as part of a three year research project which explored the nature and impact of, and responses to, ASB in rural Scotland. In order to examine the impact of the rural on policing response, the Scottish Government six-fold urban-rural classification was used to select case study sites. Additionally, because ASB is typically associated with multiple deprivation (Burney, 2006; A Millie, 2009), the Scottish Indices of Multiple Deprivation (SIMD) was also used to select case study sites. Using the SIMD and the six-fold urban-rural classification allowed Abanoch and Crian to be selected. The village of Abanoch² has a population of 1895 and is classed as a remote rural location by the Scottish Government six-fold urban rural classification³ (Scottish Neighbourhood Statistics, 2013). The second case study is the village of Crian, which has a population of 2100 and is classed as accessibly rural by the Scottish Government six-fold urban rural classification, and the local area wards report higher levels of crime than in Abanoch (Scottish Government, 2010; Scottish Neighbourhood Statistics, 2013).

Eighty hours of participant observation involving going on ‘ride-alongs’ with the police and attending youth clubs in the two communities was conducted, along with 33 interviews with people living in Abanoch and Crian and eight focus groups with a total of 38 participants conducted with young people and organisations in both locations. Research occurred between August 2011 and January 2013, which is prior to the introduction of the single police force in Scotland. Understanding the rural as a multifaceted environment was helpful for understanding variations in policing response to ASB in Scotland and shaped the methodology of this study.

² All the place names and names of participants are pseudonyms

³ The Scottish Government class ‘remote rural’ as areas with a population of less than 3,000 people, and with a drive time of over 30 minutes to a settlement of 10,000 or more. They class ‘accessibly rural’ as areas with a population of less than 3,000 people, and within a 30 minute drive time of a settlement of 10,000 or more

Notes were taken on ride-alongs, which along with the interview and focus group data, was transcribed and analysed using coding software.

Soft policing: Informing rural policing debates

Soft policing sits under the banner of neighbourhood policing, ‘adopting a wider remit, understanding crime control as being just one facet of the broader order-maintenance’ functions of traditional policing (Innes, 2005: 157). As part of this shift, policing has latterly adopted more ‘soft policing functions’, where ‘police power is based less upon the direct enactment of coercion and rests instead upon a persuasive mode of social control’ (Innes, 2005: 175). As a term, ‘soft policing’ is, as McCarthy (2014: 4) notes, ‘loaded’; something which has been seen by police officers as a waste of resource, which goes against the ‘crime fighting’ spirit present in many police officers and an agenda which is driven by requests that are not typical policing areas (Innes, 2005). This was echoed by an officer in this study:

‘We are in the patrol car when he talks about his beat - ‘this beat is quiet...here I’m more likely to deal with non-policing issues. When I ask what that might be, he laughs and says “getting a cat out a tree or solving other mundane community issues”’ (Field diary, Abanoch)

Although rural policing can be perceived as more mundane, it can allow for what McCarthy (2014: 163) notes as ‘an attempt to support a more progressive strategy of ‘governing through the social’’. This implies that soft policing is a particular strategy required in the response to particular policing situations, namely ASB.

Rural environments have long been associated with these forms of policing, where idyllised notions of the rural and rural policing imagery are still pertinent (Donnermeyer & DeKeseredy, 2014). In the context of rural Scotland it could be anticipated that a ‘soft’ policing response

would be facilitated by the rural context, where less back-up⁴ and a greater situated community knowledge⁵ allows this form of policing to be employed to a greater extent. Mawby & Yarwood (2011: 218), for example, note that:

‘In many cases those policing the countryside face a difficult task: one that must balance efficiency against community interaction; local need against national policy; fairness with local sensitivity; and, above all, trying to achieve these over often vast areas with limited resources.’

As Mawby & Yarwood (2011) note, rural environments present policing challenges. However, it also presents opportunities for the police to engage in different ways, particularly when responding to low level disorder and ASB. Although official rural policing policy tends to mirror that of urban environments, practical differences emerge when micro-scale police responses to ASB are analysed. The policing commander of Abanoch, the remote rural case study, noted that being in a rural location impacts their decision making:

‘I tend to trust my community officers to take the right action, I understand the challenges of policing a large rural beat like Abanoch [...] the beat itself is so large that I have to trust [name of community officer]’ (Interview with Inspector, Abanoch)

In addition to the scale of the policing beat, as Herbert (2006) argues, communities can also be differentiated depending on the degree to which they engage with the police and normatively negotiate order. This implies that some communities have a degree of input into the way that policing is conducted:

‘As I am out on patrol, it becomes apparent that the officer has a number of people that he calls in to see. ‘I have what I call ‘the monthly tea spots’, these are people in the community who have the gossip and know what’s going on – info that’s very useful to me [...]a lot of them I know personally too’ (Fieldnotes, Abanoch)

The officer in this remote rural community appears to subscribe to a soft style of policing, where the context of a small rural village meant that he spent a large amount of time ‘engaging’

⁴ Back-up in relation to the police refers to the proximity of other police officers who can assist if necessary

⁵ Situated knowledge refers to knowledge and understanding of police-community interactions, gained by living and working in the community which allows decisions to be taken at the local scale.

with particular members of the community. Although this has been discussed in relation to urban community policing (see Holdaway, 1983), this quote shows that the rural environment can facilitate situated community knowledge, developed through living and working in small rural communities, allowing officers to negotiate order in ‘soft’ ways. Further, and in contrast to McCarthy’s (2014) findings, this type of policing was *not* deemed inferior to harder types of policing by the officers in this study.

In some contexts multi-agency working, a tenet of the soft policing agenda, ‘remains fraught with difficulties in practice’ (Innes, 2005: 165). Yet, evidence from Abanoch, the remote rural case study, suggests that the rural context and isolation, helps multiagency partnerships to form:

‘I’m proud of the policing I do here. A lot of officers like banging down doors and see rural policing as the soft option...I don’t see it like that. I think I do an important job here and I enjoy the challenge of that, plus I know people and you get a good handle of which people are doing what, like what the youth workers and the council are doing...’ (Fieldnotes, Abanoch)

The important factor here relates to the way that soft policing becomes an entwined mode of policing delivery in rural environments. With Abanoch being a minimum of a thirty minute drive from the nearest police station and over an hour away from the nearest police custody cells, this remote rural officer therefore notes the importance of using soft policing methods:

‘Having been a city officer, the difference out here is that living and working in the community [...] well you need to be approachable, work with the community and often it’s the wee things, like speaking to people and sorting out what seems small issues to most people [...] like that’s what most of my time is spent doing [...] low level community stuff’ (Fieldnotes, Abanoch)

Although this officer picks up on the community policing themes discussed in the urban community policing literature (see for example Kelling & Bratton, 1993; Skogan, 1990), there is more likelihood in remote rural communities that the officer will live and work there and be able to respond to low level ASB in terms akin to the ‘soft’ policing agenda. The key critiques

surrounding soft policing may therefore be less important in the context of rural Scotland. As Innes (2005) notes, soft policing requires a relinquishment of power to the community, something which can be problematic. In the remote rural community, however, the intimate knowledge of the community and therefore a degree of community power and knowledge, shapes their responses:

'I am out on routine patrol with the officer in Abanoch and we approach a group of young people in the park, most I recognise from the youth club. The young people recognise the officer and greet him by his first name. He asks them what they are up to and ends up talking about football. When we leave, I ask about his approach with young people in Abanoch – 'it's about getting to know them, knowing who the trouble makers are, but the most important is communicating with young people...' (Fieldnotes, Abanoch)

This intimate knowledge can allow the officer to take discretionary⁶ decisions, in a similar manner to the 'peace keeper' role of rural police officers described by Banton (1964). Although this is something which Innes (2005) argues can be hard, evidence from this study highlights the fact that the rural policing context can empower the hierarchical policing bureaucracy to become more flexible. For example, in the remote rural case study, it was apparent the officer used a situated understanding of the community in the way that he negotiated his response to this situation and discretion was enabled by his line management:

'I have to trust my officers to more of an extent to allow them to use their discretion...the geography and size makes discretion more likely' (Rural Chief Inspector)

The notion of negotiated order maintenance, where community officers are actively engaged with negotiating their response to ASB in the community, becomes a particularly important part of the 'soft' policing response here, something which is necessitated in some rural policing locations (Wooff, 2015b).

⁶ I have explored the concept of discretionary decision making in rural policing contexts in other publications. See Wooff (2015) for a discussion of the importance of discretion in rural policing.

It is important, however, to note that the rural is a multifaceted environment, experienced in different ways by different people (Sibley, 2006). Whilst soft policing appears to map on to the realities of the majority of police work carried out in Abanoch, the higher levels of deprivation and crime in the accessibly rural case study of Crian created some differences in policing style. The local commander of Crian noted that the village's proximity to a larger local town meant a more urban style of policing:

'Well [name of community officer] is part time, so the beat is more often covered by officers from [nearby town]. I wouldn't say our policing style is much different here compared with [nearby town], Crian has lots of what I'd class as urban issues [...] it is more deprived [...] sure the community officer is helpful and we use community strategies, but it is rougher here [than Abanoch]' (Community Sergeant, Crian)

The broader organisational policing context is important for understanding why the soft policing agenda in Abanoch less clearly maps on to the realities of policing in Crian. The community police officer in Crian is part-time which means that response police officers more typically attend incidents of ASB here. They also appear to use soft policing tactics less often because these officers are less likely to have the situated knowledge of the community:

'It is more difficult to know the 'good eggs' from bad ones when you are responding to incidents in Crian but your regular beat is elsewhere. There are always lines in the sand that if you cross you'll be arrested. When you are on response, that line is closer because it's hard to know all the ins and outs of the situation you attend' (Response officer, Crian)

This suggests that the officers in Crian are less engaged with the informal situated knowledge of the community and therefore are less able to gauge the response required to situations. As Innes (2005: 166) notes, soft policing responses tend to be tempered by 'local variation in what signals drive insecurity [...] thus policing priorities have to be locally determined' – something which is hard to do with a lack of intimate knowledge of the community. This was reflected in this study, with policing priorities in Crian reflecting the fact the village has more ingrained social deprivation with higher crime and deprivation levels than Abanoch (Scottish Neighbourhood Statistics, 2013). The police response therefore tends to favour actively curbing ASB and tackling more serious forms of ASB:

'Although I'd say I do community police here, it [Crian] has its fair share of drug and alcohol problems and I think it's important to show the community we are robust in the way we deal with that. So we probably do arrest more than in other rural locations' (Response officer, Crian)

Thus, despite Crian also being classed as 'rural', the realities of police work here tend to be less soft, influenced by more deprivation and being located closer to a neighbouring city than in Abanoch. Additionally, the fact the community police officer in Abanoch lived and worked in the community for longer than the officer in Crian enabled the Abanoch officer to draw on local policing experience to facilitate a softer policing style. Nevertheless, some of the dominant characteristics of soft policing were still apparent in the ways that the police deal with some incidences of ASB in Crian. I attended the following situation, which illustrates the ways that the rural context, even in a relatively deprived village, allows officers to form relationships and forces them to take strategic decisions in the way that they respond to ASB:

It is a Thursday night and the female officer I am accompanying decides to go down to a park in Crian where the police have had a number of reports of anti-social young people. On approach there is a group of twelve 15-17 year olds. Although none of them have obvious alcohol, in my judgement some have clearly had some and shout a 'waaaaay' when we show up. I find it quite intimidating, but the officer takes it all in her stride and discusses the football (the local team has just been defeated by rivals) and mentions at the end that they have had some reports of rowdy behavior, so could they keep it down and perhaps hang out in a quieter part of the park. When we are back in the car, I ask about whether she ever feels intimidated in situations like that and she tells me she doesn't because she knows all the young people from a youth club she attends monthly. She then says 'living and working in a small community, you do see these people all the time, like I can engage and work with youth clubs and spend time getting to know these people [...]' (Fieldnotes, Crian)

This illustrates some of the complexity around the conflation of soft policing and rural policing; the local context is important for understanding the nuances of the police response in both communities. Although this is something McCarthy (2014) notes in relation to urban responses to ASB, the rural environment in Abanoch, and, to a lesser degree in Crian, enable soft policing opportunities. This makes inclusive negotiated order maintenance more of a possibility, even with relatively marginalised groups, such as young people. Even in rural settings where soft

policing is harder to do because of other structural factors, the smaller, more dispersed nature of the communities has the potential to facilitate police-community interaction. Evidence from this study suggests that rural community officers therefore tend to be in a strong position to identify what these local issues are and implement ‘softer’ approaches because of both the scale of the community and the situated community knowledge of the officers (Wooff, 2015).

Having said that, soft policing is not synonymous with rural policing; rather it is a useful way of understanding policing in some rural environments. One community officer noted:

“I see policing as a continuum, not all officer who consider themselves rural officers do rural policing a lot of the time and some urban officers would say that they do community policing like we do it here [in Abanoch]. It’s more about the opportunities and time we have to speak to people and, yeah, probably take more of a soft approach to policing” [Fieldnotes, Abanoch]

Thus in the same way as ‘the rural’ is a catch-all term, the term ‘soft policing’ needs to be considered in a nuanced manner, dependent on the community in which it is taking place. The empirical data drawn upon was collected before the introduction of Police Scotland, so the final section of this paper is going to reflect upon the links between soft policing and rural policing within the single police force in Scotland.

Soft policing narratives within Police Scotland

With the introduction of Police Scotland in April 2013, policing in Scotland has undergone a once-in-a-lifetime restructuring (Fyfe, 2014), meaning that policing has become more centralised. Although the move from eight police forces to one has created opportunities, it has also created some challenges in relation to soft policing. In particular, the local rural context, which has been highlighted as important for understanding the nuances of the soft policing agenda, risks being undermined by a policing approach widely accepted as less localised (Fyfe & Scott, 2013; Fyfe, 2014; Yarwood & Wooff, 2016). Police decision making at the national-scale has, in some places, risked diluting the embedded community knowledge developed in

the legacy forces by rural police officers (Wooff, 2015a, 2015b). This can make soft policing harder by changing the role of the rural community officer to something more akin to the urban response officer.

Therefore it is important to prioritise the work of rural community police officers and acknowledge that rural policing requires a degree of negotiating order with rural communities (Henry & McAra, 2012). This is highlighted by the situation in Crian, where response officers respond to ASB in a less negotiated way than the embedded community officer. The ‘crisis in localism’, where the centralised policing agenda has removed local accountability and contextualised policing, is embodied by the (now reversed) decision by Police Scotland to deploy armed officers on routine patrol in the Highlands of Scotland (Fyfe, 2014). This controversial policy was introduced without adequate community consultation and resulted in the police being criticised for not policing to rural contexts, rather importing an urban, Glasgow style of policing (Candlish, 2014; Fyfe, 2014; Kelly, 2014). Deploying armed officers on routine patrol is regarded as a ‘hard’ form of policing, where crime control dominates over the negotiated community interaction discussed in relation to remote rural locations (Wooff, 2015b). Interestingly, however, the response of the various rural communities subject to this policing style underscored the sense that rural policing should not be an urban style of policing parachuted in, but rather develop a context dependent nuance. It is important for soft policing to be given prominence in these arenas.

Having said that, there are signs that Police Scotland are beginning to soften their hard policing tactics. The appointment of Chief Constable Phil Gormley in December 2015 has shifted the

emphasis away from the performance oriented, ‘Key Performance Indicator culture’⁷ levelled at the force under Chief Constable Stephen House (Fyfe, 2014). As Flanagan (2016) notes, there is still a long way to go in terms of improving localism within Police Scotland, but some of the recent changes indicate steps towards more of an integrated, local and softer flavor to the national policing model.

Soft policing therefore remains a useful concept in relation to analysing rural policing responses in Scotland. Although careful not to conflate rural policing with soft policing, the rural geography, combined with different policing priorities, allows for soft policing responses to ASB to be utilized in different ways. It is important not to fall into the rural/urban binary, where the rural is depicted as idyllic and free of serious crime and ASB and the urban as the ‘dangerous other’, but instead to acknowledge that different rural environments, whilst presenting a resourcing challenge for the police, also present a significant opportunity to engage with the community.

This presents a challenge for Police Scotland moving forward, where centralisation has in places led to the loss of rural localism (Wooff, 2016). Thus, although there is a place for ‘hard policing’ in rural environments, rural officers in Scotland have a unique opportunity under the national force to embed their knowledge and experience of ‘soft’ policing within the broader community policing structure. Perhaps rural policing, instead of being at the periphery of the reform strategy, should therefore be examined as a model of best practice for the national police response to ASB.

⁷ The ‘Key Performance Indicator culture’ under Chief Constable House emphasised the importance of policing performance as measured through a number KPIs. This led to Police Scotland being criticised for a policing by numbers mentality, with officers being measured by number of arrests, seizures and detections across a range of crimes.

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