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**Eugene McLaughlin (2008) ‘Last One Out, Turn Off the “Blue Lamp”’:
The Geographical ‘Placing’ of Police Performance Management’**

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Abstract

In this article I wish to draw attention to one of the logical if unintended consequences of a performance management framework in the UK: namely plans to close traditional ‘blue lamp’ police stations on grounds of economy and effectiveness. It must be noted from the outset that what is truly remarkable is the lack of academic research that has been conducted on the police station; even in police circles little strategic thought seems to have been paid to the police station. The first section of this article discusses the ironies of a hyper-centralist performance management regime. In the second section, the discussion moves to the ironies associated with the shift to hyper-localist neighbourhood-driven policing. The final section addresses the politically ‘wicked issue’ of closing police stations—a suitable illustration of the contradictions that plague British policing. The critical point that I wish to make is that the Home Office's performance management regime has systematically disassembled the

‘structures of feeling’ and traditions associated with the Dixonian policing model—this includes the asset stripping of multi-functional ‘blue lamp’ police stations. At its most simple, the inability of performance management to encapsulate cultural meanings methodologically means that these aspects of public police work are deemed to be not just irrelevant but an obstacle to reform. As a consequence, public legitimacy is degraded as technical capabilities are enhanced.

The hyper-centralizing ironies of performance management

Readers of this issue will by now be familiar with the controversial attempts to institutionalize a performance culture into publicly funded police forces in Anglophone jurisdictions. In September 2004, the Home Office for England and Wales released a state-of-the-art, ‘best practice’ guide on police performance management tools and techniques. This document is a classic example of Foucault's governmental *savoir* thesis. Throughout the text there is reassurance that there is no ‘one size fits all’ way of ‘doing’ performance management and that professional judgement remains important. Nevertheless, for the Home Office: there are *common* performance management principles and challenges across the private and public sectors and we have drawn on “*what works*” in performance management in both sectors to provide a *realistic* approach to tackling performance issues in a force or Basic Command Unit.¹

For the Home Office, an effective performance management framework modernizes operational processes: clarifying roles and responsibilities; inserting performance into planning, budgeting and resource planning; generating structures capable of holding staff to account for individual performance; producing hard data to inform decision making regarding (Whitehall and local) strategic aims, objectives and priorities and resource allocation; and institutionalizing auditing and monitoring for continuous improvement.² The Home Office

text also identified the governmental infrastructure responsible for driving performance management into the heart of police work, namely Whitehall's public sector reform programme's service agreements and targets, a performance assessment framework and Her Majesty's Inspector of Constabulary inspections and assessments overseen by the Home Office. This infrastructure is intended, in theory, to generate the data to enable government determination of 'what works' in policing; how resources should be allocated between forces; how effective forces are in delivering on priorities specified in a national policing plan and how forces are performing by comparison to previous years and with similar forces. From a Home Office perspective, the primary problem with its performance management framework is overcoming the resistance of a profession notorious for its resistance to reform. Extra pressure is now being applied by encouraging the news media to transform the annual police performance assessment figures into league tables that 'name and shame' police forces.

There has been little to no academic research into how the latest generation of police officers have responded to the new performance management regime. However, a vivid insight is provided by an in-depth report by *The Observer* newspaper on the impact on a successful BCU of West Midlands police force: A force's every single success, every single failure, is minutely recorded and assessed, and then measured against its official performance targets. Nothing can prepare an outsider for the importance of performance targets in modern policing. Targets are everything: they drive every operation, every meeting, every police man hour. The weekly meeting briefing between the heads of every department is a statisticians dream, a blizzard of ratings...the talk is all of budgets and targets and everyone scribbles figures on notepads...Performance culture has transformed policing, probably beyond the wildest dreams of its architects.³

There has been resistance to the ever-tightening grip of the central government's target-hitting productivity framework for the following reasons:

- the inability to take into account the radically altered sociocultural circumstances and criminogenic context the police now operate within;
- the failure to contextualize police 'performance' against a complicated set of instrumental and symbolic registers and 'structures of feeling' that take place in an extremely diversified stakeholder environment (see Reiner, [1998](#); Collier, [2006](#));
- the use of performance management to cloak the erasure of constabulary independence and the nationalization of British policing (Reiner, [2001](#));
- the links between performance management and on-going attempts to create a local market in policing and crime control services (see Clarke *et al.*, [2007](#));
- the cultivation of a 'target fever' motivational calculus amongst police officers (Scott, [1998](#); Fitzgerald and Hough, [2002](#)) and
- creating an 'echo chamber' where police forces 'slice and dice' and 'game' data to chime with Whitehall targets (Fielding and Innes, [2006](#)).

In late 2007, ahead of the publication of Sir Ronnie Flanagan's 'future policing' review, police dissatisfaction with a dogmatic performance target regime spilled into the public realm in a dramatic fashion. In May 2007, the Police Federation had already attacked the government for imposing a results-driven culture through which police managers were judging officers on the number of arrests, cautions and fines they achieved. The Federation also highlighted the funnelling of resources away from frontline policing into the burnishing of performance targets and the employment of public relations specialists to spin good news statistics.

This was followed by an outright attack by the Police Superintendent's Association who argued that servicing the bureaucratic needs of the performance management regime had become a treadmill priority for the police.⁴ The news media then uncovered evidence that the pressure to meet government targets was producing unethical professional practices in the form of innovative 'no-criming' and 'screening out' strategies. In October 2007, Chief Constable Bob Quick of Surrey—the statistically best performing police force in England and Wales—declared that serious criminals were escaping justice because the police and Criminal Prosecution Service were focusing on 'soft targets' and 'sure fire' prosecutions to boost productivity. For Quick, the skewing of activity away from what local communities wanted meant that the police were 'at risk of claiming statistical success when real operational and resilience issues remain to be addressed'. Hence, it is extremely difficult to establish the 'facts' of crime or indeed the costs of policing amongst the blizzard of 'cut and paste' performance statistics and political spin.

In addition, he hinted that the police were being further compromised by being enmeshed in the performance target machinations of partner agencies.⁵ Sir Ronnie Flanagan's report did of course acknowledge many of the criticisms of the performance management regime (Flanagan, [2008](#))

The hyper-localizing ironies of neighbourhood policing

Incontrovertible evidence of public incredulity regarding the 'good news' official criminal statistics and increasing public dissatisfaction with the downgrading of the traditional 'guardianship' role of the police provoked a response. One notable by-product of 'policing by numbers' performance management was the neglect of on-the-ground territorial policing duties. The result was a diminishing routine uniformed police presence in many localities. The Association of Chief Police Officers⁶ and Her Majesty's Inspectorate of Constabulary

accepted that public confidence and reassurance were ‘highly complex, intangible factors’ that could not be influenced by crime rates.⁷ The result was the National Reassurance Policing Programme (NRPP) that ran between 2003 and 2005. It sought to address the ‘reassurance gap’ through reducing not just levels of high-volume crime but also ‘quality of life’ incidents of social and physical disorder; enhancing police *visibility* in neighbourhoods; making police services *accessible* to the public and increasing *familiarity* between police officers and local communities. The NRPP was intended to re-territorialize policing and revalidation of the symbolic role of Dixonian beat policing on the grounds that that it made a vital contribution to public reassurance and sense of local security and communal order. The programme was incorporated into the Neighbourhood Policing Programme that, in turn, reflects the government's designation of the police as a ‘critical institution’ in its ‘social cohesion’, ‘neighbourhood renewal’ and ‘new localism’ agendas. The renewed focus on ‘the neighbourhood’ is part of wider interest about the significance of social capital in a period of unprecedented transformation. Policy attention to ‘social cohesion’, ‘social fabric’, ‘social networks’, ‘civic community’, ‘trust’, ‘reciprocity’ and ‘mutuality’ at the neighbourhood level is linked to heightened concerns about declining levels of democratic engagement, a diminished sense of community, polarized social relationships and anxieties about the entrenchment of social problems in certain localities (see Putnam, [2000](#); Putnam *et al.*, [2003](#); Cantle, [2001](#), [2005](#); McLaughlin, [2005](#)).^{8,9}

By 2008, every police area in England and Wales had a dedicated, ‘mixed’ neighbourhood policing team consisting of uniformed police officers; police community support officers (PCSO); special constables; neighbourhood wardens and other authority figures—security guards, park rangers, etc. (Povey, [2001](#); Herrington and Millie, [2006](#)).^{10,11} The supposition is that confidence and reassurance can be improved by meeting public expectations. Active

‘community ownership’ envisages empowered communities prioritizing local crime and disorder issues and holding police officers to account for delivering on these priorities.

As the Flanagan review notes, there will be fundamental problems in adjusting the Home Office's performance methodologies to neighbourhood-driven policing that stresses local knowledge, action and influence. Public expectations have been raised and yet many of the outcomes the police now have to deliver on are dauntingly complex, time consuming and resource intensive: relationship building, sustaining community confidence and satisfaction, assembling self-governing, problem-solving crime resistant communities and statutory partnership working in difficult local circumstances. And as noted above, neighbourhood policing is also enmeshed in the government's ‘social cohesion’, ‘neighbourhood renewal’ and ‘new localism’ initiatives. To complicate matters further, all of these initiatives are being reworked through a post 7 July 2005 counter-terrorism agenda. Flanagan is obviously concerned about police forces being sucked into the maelstrom by having to cope with

- being extended across local, regional, national and transnational responsibilities;
- the inevitable inter- and intra-neighbourhood-level conflicts over access to insufficient policing resources;
- working in ‘neighbourhoods’ that are deeply conflicted and dysfunctional as a result of a heterogeneous array of social divisions and ingrained social problems and
- co-operating with resource-scarce statutory partners to engineer social cohesion and integration.

Police forces have no choice but to develop a sophisticated, in-depth *sociological* understanding of neighbourhoods as complicated polities that have differential access to resources, goods and services (Kelling and Stewart, [1989](#)). If forces fail to deliver on high-impact neighbourhood-level issues or fail to respond to community authorizations, public

frustration and disillusionment will increase rather than diminish. At this point, I want to emphasize that what is truly remarkable in the unfolding debate about neighbourhood-driven policing is the lack of discussion of the future of the traditional ‘blue lamp’ police station. In passing, the Flanagan report does note that For most people, the idea of ‘local’ covers little more than their street and its immediate surrounds. People do value greater visibility and accessibility; they want to know who their local bobby is and how to contact him/her and they want police stations to be accessible 24/7.^{[12](#)}

Police stations that should be defined as part of the crucial intermediate tier of ‘place shaping’ neighbourhood institutions (Kruger, [2007](#)) have instead been evaluated and found wanting by the performance management regime. They are to be modernized out of existence.

The dimming ‘blue lamp’

The case for the rationalization of ‘blue lamp’ police stations materialized in 1999 in an Audit Commission document that placed an official question mark over the role of the traditional police station. The police had paid little attention to the strategic management and maintenance of a police estate consisting of 2,700 operational sites and approximately 4,000 residential units worth £2.6 billion and costing £170 million to run. 40% of forces had not reviewed their buildings to assess how well they met operational needs. The Audit Commission found that the physical condition of the building stock was poor; there were significant variations in running costs; space utilization was inefficient and buildings were outdated in ability to cope with modern technology and in the wrong place to support police operations.

Police forces would have to provide a ‘business case’ evidencing that they needed existing buildings and facilities and that they contributed to the operational policing priorities laid down by the Home Office. Flexibility would be the new mantra with leasing and collaboration rather than property ownership. This would be accompanied by ‘hot desking’, ‘work stations’, etc. for staff. Extra resources could be raised through selling off prime locations to property developers.

The Audit Commission acknowledged the political problem of public attachment to police stations: ‘For many people, the traditional police station is a tangible reminder of the police’s presence, a source of reassurance, second only to the sight of a “bobby on the beat”’.¹³ The proposed closure of a local police station was a politically sensitive issue because communities asserted ownership rights. Police forces would therefore have ‘to educate the public about what is *effective and affordable*’ (Audit Commission, [1999](#), p. 4, italics added). For the Audit Commission, there are no ‘sacred cows’. The traditional police station was irrelevant because

- most public contact with the police took place by telephone with less than 10% of visitors to police stations reporting a crime or accident;
- many communities would be better served by ‘public enquiry facilities’ located in shopping centres, near schools and problem housing estates and
- in future there would be greater use of internet and video links to ‘interface’ with the public.

Closing police stations and/or contracting opening times would allow management to deploy more officers on patrol. The traditional police station also contradicted the Audit Commission’s preferred ‘go go’ policing style of ‘fast time’ 999 response and faceless specialist crime and intelligence-led policing.

The issue re-surfaced in the HMIC report (Povey, [2001](#)) that discussed the damaging effects of the performance management regime on the state of the nation's police stations. The traditional British multi-functional police station with its traditional 'blue lamp', is a resonant image of British policing with almost as much symbolic importance as the uniformed bobby. It is a gateway to police services and – in an emergency – a place of sanctuary. (Povey, [2001](#), p. 98)

It was famed for its 'ease of access, convenience of location and high quality personal interactions'. The HMIC accepted the general findings of the Audit Commission, adding that front-counter services were under-developed; there was a lack of resources and support and respect for civilian enquiry officers; and inadequate attention had been paid to design possibilities for reception areas. In addition, there were limited data on who used police stations, why and with what outcomes. Yet this was vital to decisions about opening times and staffing for example. This was symptomatic of the lack of recognition of 'the symbolic importance of a police presence in neighbourhoods'. Police forces were developing alternatives to the police station on an *ad hoc*, incoherent basis. There was also a widespread assumption that 'e' or 'virtual' police–public relationships would become more common. Alarmingly, the HMIC report found little to no evidence of local communities being consulted or indeed informed about developments, particularly regarding closures and re-locations. The HMIC conclusion was that the police needed to maximize the value of police properties not to property developers but to local communities: explore possibilities for innovative rejuvenation and refurbishment; improve services; use new communication methodologies in an imaginative manner; and actively involve communities in decisions concerning police properties.

Given the need to revitalize neighbourhoods *institutionally* and reassert the ‘guardianship’ role of the police, one would have assumed that the police station—as a community asset—would have an important *locational* role to play in the launching of the neighbourhood policing initiative. However, an Institute of Public Policy Research (IPPR) report (Rogers and Houston, [2004](#)) noted that the condition of police buildings had continued to deteriorate since the publication of the Audit Commission and HMIC reports. The dominant police and Home Office perspective that police buildings were not cost effective and ‘out of date’ was accelerating closures and sales. They noted the 2004 Metropolitan Police announcement to sell 200 police buildings worth up to £900 million, many of them operational stations, over the next decade. According to the Metropolitan Police, a ‘radical new strategy’ was needed to support ‘the requirements of modern frontline policing’ in London. The money raised was to be reinvested in new small or medium-sized police stations, street kiosks, offices in council buildings and supermarket booths. The Metropolitan Police was also developing ‘a new breed of police facility, closer to crime hot spots and better placed to serve the needs of local communities’. Included in the Metropolitan Police's controversial sale were historic ‘blue lamp’ police stations including Vine Street and Tottenham Court Road. The latter is now a Marks and Spencer's food store! This closure programme was realized with little to no public consultation.

What concerned Rogers and Houston ([2004](#)) was that in the rush to sell buildings and raise capital, there seemed to be a refusal within the Home Office or police to acknowledge the emblematic nature of Dixonian ‘blue lamp’ police stations. Nor was there evidence of long-term investment in a new generation of imaginative, ‘community policing’ buildings. For them well-designed, long lasting police stations can do much more than inspire trust in the police; they can work, like all good public buildings, to embody and sustain the values of the public realm: values of democracy, citizenship and public service. Public buildings have a

vital role to play in fostering a sense of belonging to unique and rooted civic community enduring through time.... Even the standard example, with its solid brick façade, formal entrance, open front desk and ‘blue lamp’, worked as a readable, reassuring, symbol of security and public order. Along with the British Bobby's truncheon, tunic and coned hat, it was a world-recognised icon – an exemplary piece of branding. As a general rule, however, the police have failed to build on this legacy. (Rogers and Houston, [2004](#))

Formless policing?

Despite the shift towards neighbourhood-driven policing, there is scant evidence that police forces and police authorities are rethinking their performance management approach to police stations. A Metropolitan Police Authority ([2003](#)) report noted the exceptional nature of London with its ‘dense urban fabric’, complicated borough-based planning regimes and some of the most expensive property prices in the world. It provided facilities for over 40,000 police officers and civil staff across London split up into operational, support, training, residential, sports and specialist and storage facilities. This encompassed 600 operational buildings, 1116 residential properties and 667 rooms in section houses. Decades of underinvestment and un-imaginative investment meant that much of the estate was outdated, in the wrong place and constituted an unacceptable working environment for officers and staff and ‘customers’. Upgrading or renewing the estate was no longer an option. The Metropolitan Police's ‘maximum flexibility/reduced costs’ property template would be rolled out across London. This strategy reiterated the necessity to sell off police buildings that did not conform to modern requirements. What is remarkable, given the neighbourhood-driven policing mantra, is that, this blue print was decided without public consultation.

The illusions of consultation: neighbourhood resistance to the closure of police stations

The Metropolitan Police required each borough to draw up their own plans to rationalize their 'property portfolio'. The asset management document for the borough of Camden, for example, published in November 2007 lays out the nature of and justification for the changes to police properties. Five multi-functional police stations would be replaced with separate

- office accommodation housing command management and support functions;
- front counters: available in a wide mix of police accommodation in the borough;
- custody centres with related facilities such as interview rooms, consultation rooms and a search suite and
- neighbourhood policing bases: offices at local police stations, small kiosks, offices within partnership bodies, and locations in schools, hospitals, places of worship and supermarkets, providing local 'surgeries' and public contact points or 'shop fronts', possibly staffed by volunteers.

There would also be a 'warehouse' that will accommodate the majority of operational police officers and resources for the borough in one main building. It will also provide garaging for police vehicles and operational parking, allowing a large number of vehicle movements with minimal disruption and enabling faster response times. These bases will not be open to the public but will bring officers and vehicles together at a single location with faster access to all parts of the borough. This would be a new style of police base for Camden and central to the requirements of a possible location will be excellent 24/7 transport accessibility and vehicular access, together with a high level of operational parking availability. The building will need to be as flexible as possible so that internal layouts can be adapted as necessary to suit changing police requirements.

This functional rationalization inevitably meant the closure of at least two “antiquated” police stations with a commitment to reinvesting savings back into frontline policing.

The Camden ‘Estate Strategy’ report¹⁴ emphasized that the Metropolitan Police ‘places great value on consultation and communication to ensure it understands the needs, wishes and priorities of the communities it serves. It is important these communities and other stakeholders understand more about the estate from which the police operate, its size, condition and the changes that are required’. And of course this is where rationalization plans become politically complicated for the police officer in charge of borough policing.

Opponents used the closure plans as evidence that the ‘now it's local’ neighbourhood policing rhetoric was masking the reality of ‘bottom-line’ based central decision making: The manner in which the police stations saga has been handled has done little to build trust between the police and the community. For three years, police bosses have been playing a cagey game, making hollow promises and saying little of substance. Now it seems that all the fears voiced by residents have been justified...Arguably the writing has been on the wall for both stations since the day Camden's Chief Superintendent Mark Heath described these as ‘not fit for purpose’. Whenever this unconvincing phrase is resorted to by officialdom, to describe either buildings or organisations, there can be little doubt that someone somewhere is about to wield the axe and chop off a few heads or send in the bulldozers. There will of course be no shortage of developers willing to invest in making these police stations ‘fit for purpose’ – meaning whatever purpose will yield the greatest financial return. Residents have a right to feel cheated, and to vent their anger in no uncertain terms during the public consultation. At least this provides a chance for the public to intervene before progress can be made on a grubby and grasping scheme to dispose of these invaluable community assets.¹⁵

The campaign to keep the two Camden police stations open has taken the form of well-attended public meetings (with a demand for *more* police officers and stations, not less), petitions and demonstrations and the mobilization of residents to participate in the area consultation exercise. However, the Metropolitan Police is adhering to its strategy, with powerpoint presentations attempting to reassure residents that the decision is based on objective criteria and that the sale of the properties will free up resources for frontline policing. The campaigners have been defined as unrealistic, unrepresentative and practising ‘nimbyism’. For the campaigners, the police seem to be incapable of understanding that local communities are reacting so angrily because the closures are symptomatic of a wider pattern of state withdrawal. The shutting of police stations is happening at the same time as the closure of post offices, GP surgeries and primary schools. As one campaigner told a local news paper: ‘Local people also understand that once you sell off a valuable public asset, there is no turning the clock back – it’s gone for good’.¹⁶ Jenkins ([2008](#)) notes the wider ramifications: there is no way of measuring the impact on communities of thus ripping out their institutional memories and meeting places...It turns communities into bleak, car-reliant dormitories, devoid of places of casual association. It removes the informal leadership of the resident teacher, doctor, police officer, shopkeeper. What central government may think it saves in general, it loses in the particular. It is in the particular that people live. (Jenkins, [2008](#), p. 39)

In addition, the determination to close the police stations in spite of local opposition, is a vivid illustration of the ability of the police HQ to ignore local communities because as the monopoly service provider, it knows that communities do not have a real choice. The inference is that neighbourhood preferences—and the responsibilities of local police commanders—do not really matter.

Conclusion: going, going, gone

The police have always had the impossible job of managing contradictory expectations. However, as has been demonstrated in this article, this has intensified dramatically as the police struggle to respond to the multitude of conflicting demands emanating from the extremes of hyper-centralism and hyper-localism. Local police commanders are now confronted with the equivalent of a changeable jigsaw puzzle where the performance management and neighbourhood policing pieces make little sense. This is compounded by the fact that rank and file officers are alienated from performance management and sceptical about the manner in which neighbourhood policing has been rolled out.

The Home Office performance management regime continues to define public regard for the ‘place shaping’ Dixonian policing model as rose-tinted sentimentality and nostalgia for a ‘time that never was’. For the modernizers, the crime control assumptions of the Dixonian model are exhausted. However, a primary consequence of the shift to target-led policing has been a haemorrhaging of support for the local police particularly where it applies to the demand for not just a visible but a meaningful, verifiable police presence in communities. As many commentators have noted across a range of policy domains, the Labour government has been unable to comprehend the emotional appeal of what Cohen ([2008](#)) defines as ‘the local and the particular’. This has produced an ‘inchoate feeling that an anonymous and clumsy central authority is closing local institutions which, rationally or not, people treasure, and there's nothing they can do to stop them’ (Cohen, [2008](#)). The devaluing instead of revaluing of the office of police constable and ‘blue lamp’ police stations are amongst the clearest manifestations of impoverished thinking about British policing brought about by performance management. It also throws into question the long-term sustainability and credibility of the current neighbourhood policing experiment. The political fallout could be daunting if the

neighbourhood-driven policing initiative fails to deliver on public expectations because of the performance management regime.¹⁷

Footnotes

1 Home Office ([2004](#), p. 7, italics added).

2 Home Office ([2004](#), p. 8).

3 *The Observer* ([2003](#), p. 28).

4 *The Times* (9 September 2007).

5 *London Evening Standard* (17 October 2007).

6 ACPO ([2001](#)).

7 ACPO ([2001](#); Povey [2001](#), p. 19).

8 Office of Deputy Prime Minister ([2005](#)).

9 Commission on Integration and Cohesion ([2007](#)).

10 ACPO ([2001](#)).

11 Home Office ([2005](#)).

12 Flanagan ([2008](#), p. 117).

13 Audit Commission ([1999](#), p. 2).

14 see MPA website.

15 *Hampstead and Highgate News*? Editorial ‘Scandal of Police Station Sell Off’ (29 November 2007).

16 *Camden New Journal* (17 January 2008).

17 The author wishes to thank Jenny Fleming and the two reviewers for requiring me to view police stations through the lens of performance management.

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