Unravelling the role of Police and Crime Commissioners

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Abstract

In light of the introduction of Police and Crime Commissioners (PCCs) to invigorate the democratic governance of the police, I examine how PCCs perceived their new role within their first year in office. Based on 32 interviews with PCCs across England and Wales and one case study, I illustrate how the role has been perceived broadly, from police management through to crime-reduction co-ordination. I outline two PCC types that – while are not fixed and subject to change – have significant implications for how the role is delivered. I explore why these two perspectives have dominated the role, considering in particular professional and political backgrounds. These findings are then examined in the light of a wider political debate to expand the remit of PCCs, which may have significant implications both on their ability to carry out the role and in terms of holding PCCs to account.

Key Words: police; democracy; governance; crime reduction; politics

Introduction

Police and Crime Commissioners (PCCs) were introduced under the Police Reform and Social Responsibility Act 2011 with the hope of rejuvenating the democratic face of policing (Davies, 2014). To achieve this aim, politicians and think tanks formulated a wish-list of roles and responsibilities that they thought PCCs ought to have as the policy came into fruition. They argued that PCCs should be voices of the people (or more specifically, voices of the victims) (Home Office, 2012), local criminal justice figureheads (Carswell, 2002), crime fighters (Wasserman, 2011), police scrutinisers and commissioners (Police Reform Taskforce, 2007), amongst others. These arguments provided a series of images about the role which PCCs could model themselves on.

In this paper, I draw upon detailed interviews with PCCs to illuminate how they envisaged the role in their first six months in office. Three months after PCCs had been elected, I sent formal letters to all PCCs inviting them to be interviewed. Thirty-seven eventually responded, of whom 32 agreed to participate (a response rate of 78%). Telephone interviews with PCCs (lasting 45 minutes on average) were conducted between April and August of 2013 (five to nine months after PCCs had assumed office). The interviews entailed a broad set of questions relating to the nature of the role, relationships (predominantly with the public, chief constables and Police and Crime Panels) and measures of success, amongst other issues. This paper focuses on the results of PCCs' responses to questions about their role, ambitions and experiences in their first few months in office. These data were supplemented by further interviews with key stakeholders in policing and crime reduction in a case study area.

Using these data, I argue here that there were two dominant role-types played out by PCCs, which I term Police Managers and Crime Reduction Co-ordinators (CRCs). I illustrate that these specific interpretations of the role informed PCCs' responses to questions about their purpose, capabilities and visions of success. Using examples from the case study, I identify the malleability of these perceptions and the way in which the job can, and has, been broadly played out. I consider some of the characteristics of PCCs, such as professional backgrounds and political affiliation in order to elucidate the reasons for the diverse set of perspectives, before considering more generally the implications of calls to further expand PCC's reach into the criminal justice system. This analysis helps to elucidate the experiences of PCCs in their first year in office and bring greater clarity as to how the role has been envisaged by the subjects of this experiment in democratic policing.

The scope of the PCC role: From police management to crime reduction co-ordination

When PCCs were introduced, the Home Secretary made clear that PCCs would bring "real local scrutiny of how Chief Constables and their forces perform" (May, 2013), predominantly through their powers to hire and fire chief constables. But with crime reduction also at the heart of their role (May, 2010), PCCs were called to engage with the criminal justice system and "provide a holistic approach to crime reduction" by becoming powerful local figureheads (Police Reform Taskforce, 2007). Thus, both police management and crime reduction co-ordination were presented as two fundamental pillars of the PCC role. While these two aspects are interlinked (i.e. the police are one of the key actors in crime-reduction), they are also distinct. Holding the police to account requires PCCs to focus on the police organisation, while crime reduction implicates working with a broader set of actors in and beyond the criminal justice system. Faced with a heavy workload, PCCs were faced with difficult decisions as to the scope of their

role. In interviews with PCCs in their first several months in office, responses varied on a spectrum between police management and crime reduction co-ordination.

There was a tendency for over half of PCCs I interviewed to see the job as a police management role. I therefore referred to these PCCs as Police Managers. I defined Police Managers as those PCCs who were primarily concerned with the running of the police organisation and focused on the internal force mechanics. Conversely, approximately half of PCCs interviewed emphasised the significance of what they often termed the 'and crime' part of the job. This alluded to a wider responsibility for crime and justice management beyond the police service. They typically saw the role as an opportunity to fuse various aspects of the criminal justice system together into a more integrated and efficient system. I have used the label Crime Reduction Co-ordinator (CRC) to refer to the PCCs who tended to prioritise these aspects of the role.

PCCs differed in the extent to which they identified with police management and crime reduction co-ordination and almost all highlighted the importance of playing both roles. In total, I identified slightly more Police Managers (18) than CRCs (14). These categories emerged following analysis of transcripts using a qualitative data software package (Nvivo 10). This facilitated analysis of both the content and the language employed by PCCs in their responses to interview questions, which were subsequently coded into overarching themes and sub-themes.

While it is recognised that in reality most PCCs expressed elements from both perspectives, using this analysis it was possible to place PCCs into Police Manager and CRC groups on a scale. I plotted these PCCs on a spectrum according to their slant towards police management and crime-reduction co-ordination. The results are presented in Figure 1. Looking across the PCC mission scale, it is clear that some PCCs at the ends of the spectrum perceived the role in relatively narrow terms (i.e. predominantly as police management or crime reduction co-ordination). However, the majority of PCCs were placed towards the centre of the scale, revealing that many had at least understood the need to deliver both aspects of the role.

In interviews with PCCs, in order to tap into how they perceived the role, I enquired about the problems they believed they were there to address, how they were responding to these issues, and what success looked like for them after their first term in office. Police Managers and CRCs tended to respond differently to these questions.

Police Managers

Most PCCs who advocated this approach believed that they were there to replace Police Authorities who they believed had been ineffective in holding the Chief Constables to account. These PCCs regarded themselves as the answer to this problem and as one PCC described to me, were

'determined to reset the balance' of power between PCC and Chief Constable in their favour.

Figure 1. PCCs' perceptions of the role
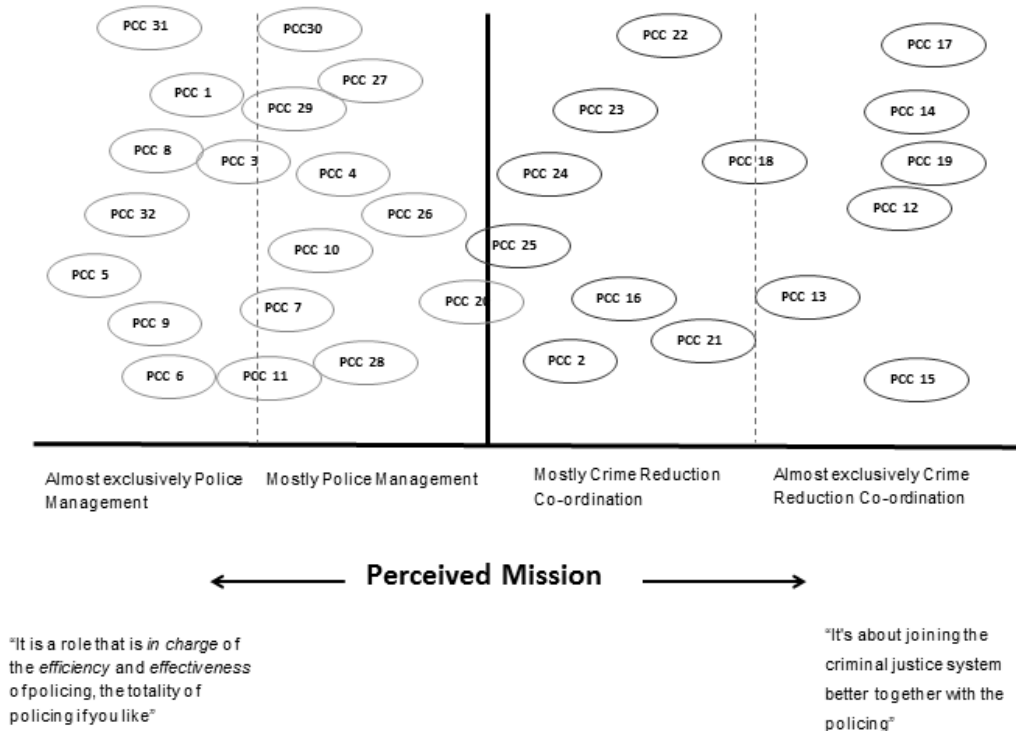
Consider, for example the language used by one PCC who described how he held his Chief Constable to account through a new board he had established:

> Q: How do you hold your Chief Constable to account?
> A: [We convene a board which is based on] the measures set out in the Police and Crime Plan, but broadened to change management issues and HR personnel issues … and we go through reports against the Plan and reports against changed management. … I'm talking about crime recording programmes and applications and such like, some pretty weighty multi-million programmes, so we need to be keeping an eye on those in terms of delivery and benefit mapping and all of that. (Conservative PCC 9)

From this perspective, the police were regarded as an organisation which needed effective management through strong direction by keeping a close eye on finances. Getting the organisation to run effectively and efficiently was a key motivator for those PCCs who had adopted a police management mind-set. In some respects however, this approach reflected a

reinforcement of a performance-management regime, as targets were regarded as a means to achieve this. For example, one PCC explained that:

> We put three clear aims at the start: Cut crime, catch the criminals that are committing it, and cut the costs. Keep it simple and a clear direction, and you will get the results. (Conservative PCC 11)

Ironically, this was one of the facets of police governance which the authors of the policy had hoped would be tackled by PCCs (see for example Police Reform Taskforce, 2007).

For some Police Managers, success lay in reduced levels of recorded crime. This was unsurprising in light of the comments made by the likes of the Home Secretary that the sole purpose of the police was to cut crime (May, 2010). In interviews with PCCs, it was clear that this target meant different things for Police Managers. Some settled on simply "less crime, fewer victims" as a sufficient indicator, while others focused on very specific crimes measured by police performance indicators.

However, some Police Managers were sceptical about their ability to affect crime levels and saw this only as a loose measure of their success. Instead, they pointed to a range of other measures, such as improved police performance and managing cuts to budgets effectively. Notably, these notions of success rested upon improvements within the police organisation and often sounded as if they were measures borrowed directly from the chief constable:

> Q: What does success look like for you?
> A: Success for me would be for [the force area] to have maintained its frontline resilience, the number of frontline officers … And that the police are again able to say that they do police one of the safest counties in which to live (Labour PCC 3)

This came through even where other measures of success were highlighted. Concepts such as partnership were seen as a means towards better police performance (which ultimately meant crime reduction).

Crime Reduction Co-ordinators

Although there was a clear disposition amongst 18 PCCs towards police management, 14 PCCs I had interviewed tended to place greater emphasis on the 'and crime' part of the job in their responses. This alluded to a wider responsibility for crime and justice management beyond the police service. These PCCs typically saw the role as an opportunity to fuse various aspects of the criminal justice system together into a more integrated and efficient system.

CRCs emphasised the multi-faceted nature of crime that required more than just the police to tackle it, often pointing to the significance of

other local services. As part of this philosophy, CRCs believed that the fundamental problem that they were there to address was a lack of co-ordinated service provision. Therefore, strong leadership of the wider criminal justice system and beyond was seen as essential to the role. For example:

> Q: What should the role of a PCC be?
> A: I think a really huge role which is what I'm focusing on, is trying to make sense of what is a very fragmented and dislocated system ... I think it's about joining the criminal justice system better together with the policing, it's about perhaps making some of those shifts towards collaborative services and integrated services even which have been a long way from the table in previous years. So it's public sector reform to a great degree, getting the system to work better, and that's what sits at the heart of my Plan. (Independent PCC 1)

In contrast to the police management perspective, CRCs tended to perceive themselves as having little influence over the police and instead believed they were more likely to leave their mark through crime reduction in a more holistic sense. They tended to believe that they would make a difference through engaging with other local crime and justice stakeholders and mobilising collective action:

> Q: What should the role of a PCC be?
> A: ...the police, even if they had no one there, would get on and do policing. Frankly it would be for the most part, you wouldn't even notice the difference, it'd be done as well. It's the crime reduction bit where we can really make the difference. (Conservative PCC 13)

In this way, CRCs also spoke about the importance of leadership, but in a much broader sense than envisaged by Police Managers. This leadership approach was given greater prominence in the light of the austere financial climate that all organisations were facing. Many PCCs recognised that co-ordinating crime reduction services was essential to achieve savings through more efficient working practices and reducing duplication. Better partnership working was a commonly cited marker of success for CRCs. For Independent PCC 1, for example, success was about "getting all the partners to move in the same direction and talk to one another", while for Conservative PCC 4, it was likewise "being able to look at the whole policing and CJS and say yep, this now works better." As part of this, commissioning was explicitly identified as one of the most powerful tools at their disposal.

> Q: What should the role of a PCC be?
> A: ...We have put in very accountable [commissioning mechanisms]... to old people's homes, to youth clubs, all these kind of areas ... we would be getting bids from 2 or 3 different groups for

the same thing who didn't know that the other existed. Actually I could say 'well you're not all having the money unless you go for a joint bid and start to work together'. And that was a very powerful tool. (Conservative PCC 1)

Therefore CRCs believed that their strength lay in joining up the criminal justice system and commissioning was regarded as an instrument to achieve this.

Although some CRCs underlined crime reduction as an important feature, they were usually able to provide a wide range of other markers. Notions of public confidence and community safety were also at the heart of some of their agendas. For example:

Q: What does success look like for you?
A: I think community safety is an absolutely crucial part of the PCCs function. It's not just about the police. If you're talking about the 'and crime' bit, it's the community safety aspect of policing. And if you see my Plan, if you want it in a sentence, it's less crime, because that's what the Home Secretary has said she will mark me on. That's one target for the police so I couldn't really dip out on that one. But to me it's more peace and good order. (Independent PCC 5)

However, the majority of these PCCs were less clear about how exactly this kind of success would or could be measured and few were able to elaborate on how this might be achieved. Three PCCs made specific references to encouraging evidence-based policing and were able to cite academic research, but these PCCs were a minority.

On the point of success, one theme that tended to unite both Police Managers and CRCs was the significance of electoral success (both in terms of greater turnout at the next elections and re-election). This might have been expected given that one of the clear messages that was consistently voiced by the likes of the Home Secretary was that if a PCC failed to do their job, their ultimate sanction would come in the form of not being re-elected. For both Police Managers and CRCs, success became synonymous with a greater public appreciation of the role, and perhaps more importantly, their re-election. For example, one CRC could not envisage any other possible gauges of success:

Q: In 3 years from now what does success look like for you?
A: I think having some public appreciation for the role that I have and for what I have been able to achieve, such that more people take part in the next election.
Q: Are there any other indicators of success that you might look at?
A: Well getting re-elected obviously. (Labour PCC 11)

A Police Manager also spoke in similarly narrow terms:

> Success will be when people have a measurably better understanding of the role of PCC … primarily it comes down to people understanding that there is a value in this role. I'm committed to it and very committed working very hard and I want people to feel that the role is a success. (Independent PCC 2)

Aside from this consensus on electoral success, the Police Management and the CRC perspectives illustrated two distinct ways of understanding the role. Table 1 summarises the main distinctions. However, these perceptions of the role are not static and often PCCs appeared to move between both sides of the spectrum, as my observations in the case study site revealed.

Table 1. Key distinctions between Police Managers and CRCs

	Police Managers	**CRCs**
Operational remit	The police	Criminal justice system and beyond
The problem	Impotent and invisible Police Authorities; poor police performance	Lack of joint working in crime reduction - too much overlap in service provision
The answer	Leadership; business approach; performance indicators	Leadership; commissioning of services; partnership working
Success	Reduced crime; improved police performance; public awareness of role	Better partnership working; community safety; public awareness of role

Evolving perceptions of the role

I spent eight months in a case study area where I observed one PCC who appeared to move from a strict police management approach towards more crime-reduction co-ordination. Before the elections, the PCC seemed to approach the job from a police management perspective. In my initial interview with her and at hustings debates, it was apparent that the problems she wanted to address were police-related, such as issues around burglary detection rates, poorly recorded crimes and the policing of rural areas.

However, in our follow-up interview after the PCC had been in office for eight months, the Chief Constable observed that the PCC had begun to look beyond the narrow confines of police management - although much of this appeared to be initiated by other parties:

> Q: How has the PCC balanced out her 'policing' and 'and crime' responsibilities?
> A: ...[The PCC] has been quite engaged in the 'and crime' for the very practical reason that there are so many partnerships and so many people who want to kind of build a relationship or get engaged, she's just had to get on with it. So she's got most leverage over the police, but she's probably done in time wise, if you did a time and motion study, she probably spends quite a bit of time on the 'and crime' bit.

This comment prompted me to conduct a time and motion analysis based on data I had collected on a weekly basis from November 2012 to the end of June 2013, using the PCC's website which had listed her weekly diary commitments (Figure 2). The meeting types were categorised (for example, meetings with Police and Crime Panels were categorised as 'governance meetings'; meetings with government officials were termed 'national meetings', and so on). Through this process, it was possible to quantify the types of meetings that the PCC had been attending. It is probable that the PCC spent considerably more time with senior police managers than the diary data reveals due to the fact that informal meetings with the Chief Constable and his staff were not recorded. However, the data was useful in identifying the way in which the PCC had balanced her commitments.

Figure 2. Case study PCC's first eight months: Monthly activities
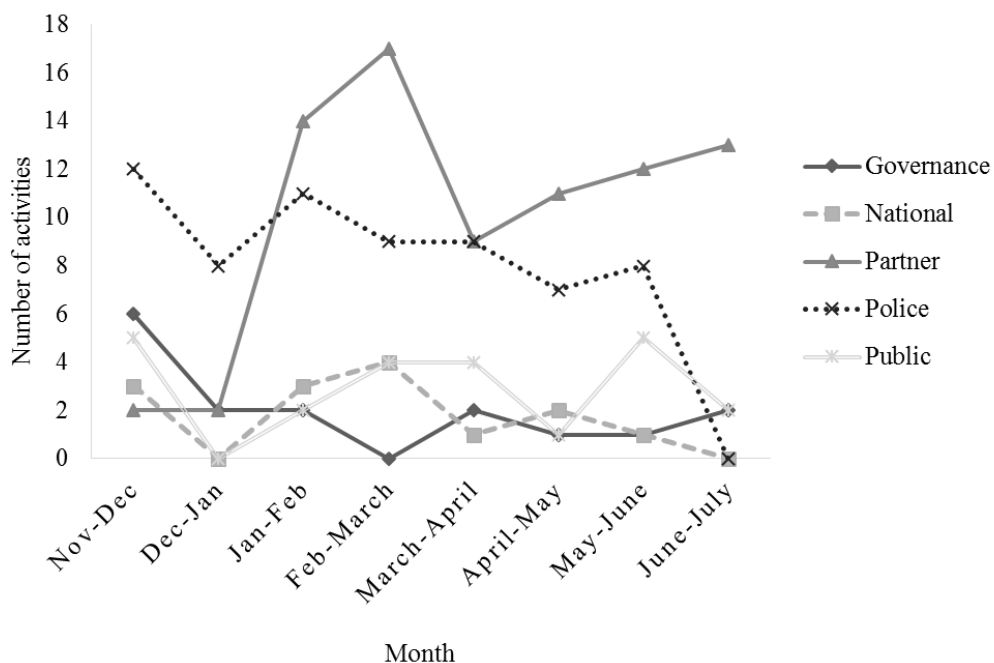
While the PCC had spent almost a third of her time meeting the police (31%), the majority of her recorded time (39%) was actually spent meeting local partners (for example, local councils and Community Safety Partnerships). The remaining time was dedicated to public engagement, governance meetings and national meetings. As Figure 2 demonstrates, the PCC spent the majority of her first three months in office on meetings with the police. But at the start of 2013, meetings with partners dramatically increased and remained her most prominent activity in all but one of the following months. Simultaneously, the numbers of meetings she had with members of the police declined at a steady rate. These trends are partially explained by the fact that she was obligated to write her Police and Crime Plan for March 2013, which entailed a large amount of consultation with local partners. While the number of such meetings fell significantly after this, they continued to take up the majority of her time and increased at a steady rate after April 2013.

From the PCC's perspective, she came to believe that she did not need to focus on the police as much as she had anticipated because she had taken over a competent police force which was already well run. Consequently, she felt that she did not need to spend as much time on the organisation compared to other PCCs. This revealed that she had gone through a learning process since she had come into office. This PCC had formerly been a member of a Police Authority where she had dealt with force performance figures, but as a PCC, she found herself consulting more frequently with a wide range of actors within the criminal justice system. This shift in activities meant that she had gradually started to appreciate some of her additional 'and crime' responsibilities. In this way, perceptions of the role are dynamic and in this case they were shaped by the experiences the PCC faced in her first few months in office.

Nevertheless, I believe that she fundamentally regarded the job in police management terms. Observations of both public and private meetings with local partners highlighted a police-oriented focus. Issues such as detection rates, police budgets and force priorities were also recurring conversation topics. At times, it felt as if a police representative was leading the meetings. Based on these experiences, the PCC appeared to remain closer to the police management perspective. I concluded that this persistence on this aspect of the role was partially a product of her previous career experience (having been involved in business and working on the Police Authority). Indeed, the background of PCCs may be a significant explanatory factor in shaping perceptions of the role as I discuss next.

The wider context

The evidence presented above illustrates a diverse set of interpretations regarding the role. Some of this variation may be explained by the wide range of backgrounds which PCCs have come from. For example, most CRCs

previously had a career in politics, either as a local or national politician, while Police Managers came from a more diverse set of backgrounds, including local politics, the police, the military and business, amongst others (Figure 3). Those coming from political backgrounds may have been more acquainted to working across sectors, which might explain why some CRCs perceived the job in broad terms. By contrast, four Police Managers were former police officers and a further four had previously worked in the military. It is possible that coming from a hierarchical organisation, such as the army or the police, may have shaped these PCCs' ideas about what the role entailed and how it ought to be delivered (for example, through leadership and target-setting). Five Police Managers also had previous experience in running businesses, which may further explain why several PCCs equated their role to being the head of a large organisation.

**Figure 3. Police Manager (PM) and CRC backgrounds**
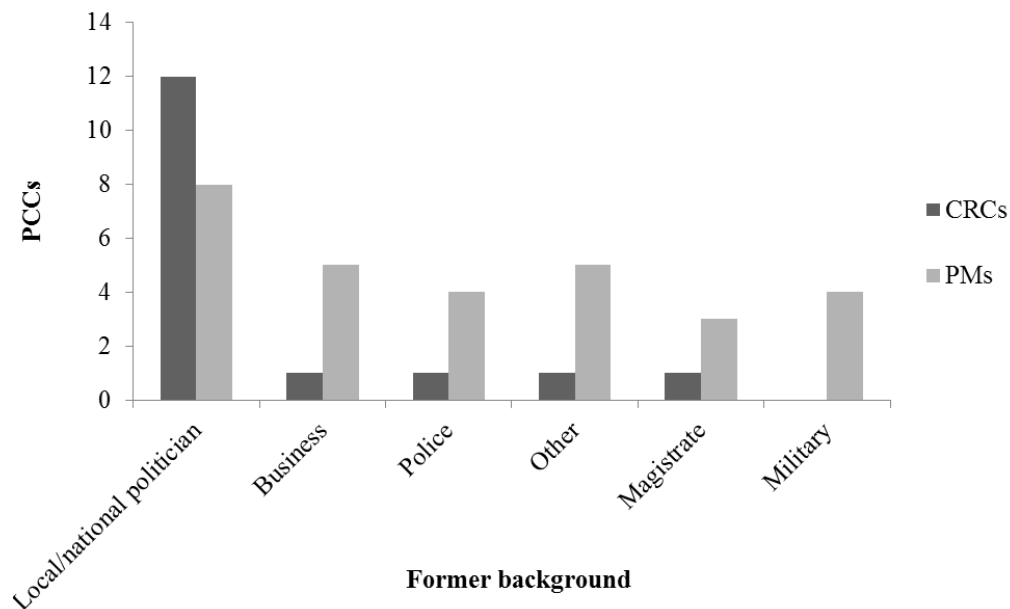
PCCs will have also developed specific networks from these backgrounds, which may further define their role. Those from a local councillor background, for example, might be expected to bring partners together more readily under the PCC role than those who had spent their lives in the military, because they may have had pre-existing relationships in particular local networks. Conversely, PCCs from the police may have had strong ties with others in the organisation and feel more comfortable managing within the confines of the police organisation.

Political affiliation may also account for some of the different perceptions of the role. Half of all Police Managers were Conservatives, while CRCs were more evenly split by political affiliation, with the majority coming from the Labour party (Figure 4). From this perspective, one could

speculate that Conservative PCCs may be reluctant to deviate from the Home Secretary's assertion that policing is about cutting crime, with the corollary being that they perceive their own job as 'making the police more effective crime fighters' (Loader, 2013: 44). In comparison, Labour PCCs may be more inclined to think of the job more broadly in crime reduction terms, in line with Labour-led initiatives, such as Community Safety Partnerships.

Figure 4. Police Manager (PM) and CRC Political Affiliations
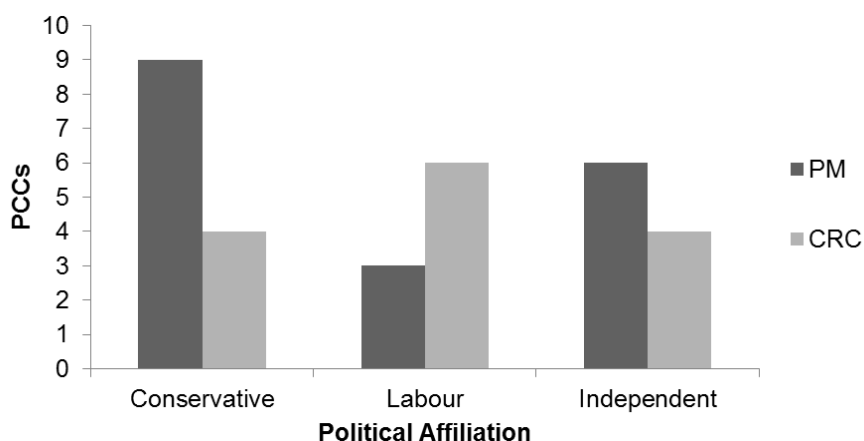
Discussion

This analysis provides a snapshot into certain elements of the role which PCCs saw as fundamental to their mission. It should be noted that PCCs claimed to have a wide interest in a number of other areas, such as public engagement, victim satisfaction and innovation (for example, see Policy Exchange, 2013). However, this paper has focused on two of the most dominant perceptions of the role as expressed by the majority of PCCs interviewed.

PCCs concerned with police management recognised significant problems with the governance of the police, particularly with regard to the impotence of police authorities and poor accountability over Chief Constables. For Police Managers, leadership - particularly in a business-type manner - was their solution to some of these issues. When these PCCs looked ahead to the end of their first term in office, success was usually rooted within the police organisation, based on reduced crime figures, stronger accountability mechanisms and improved policing.

The CRC perspective revealed a set of contrasting perceptions about the role. CRCs generally identified similar problems to Police Managers, but they were also able to point to a broader set of issues relating to the wider criminal justice system. Like Police Managers, CRCs placed great value on leadership, but for them it was about managing a cacophony of voices from within local criminal justice networks. Finally, with regards to success, CRCs highlighted a broader set of success indicators, such as partnership

working, public engagement and community safety - although electoral success was a recurring theme for all PCCs.

These perspectives were undoubtedly linked to the backgrounds and pre-existing relationships that the PCCs had. Those with expertise and networks in politics came into the job with a different perspective of the scope of the role compared to those coming from the police or the military. Similarly, political affiliation and caution about deviating from a political line may have shaped PCCs' definitions of the role and visions of success. Likewise, perceptions of the role should not be divorced from other contextualising factors, such as personality, relationships with Chief Constables or force size. These varying influences meant that PCCs were rarely fixed into one perspective and swayed between both ends of the spectrum - as my experiences in the case study area suggested.

As debate continues over the future of PCCs, the nature of the role will evolve. Since the inception of PCCs, one particular debate has revolved around whether PCCs ought to have greater powers in the criminal justice system (see for example, Police Reform Taskforce, 2007; Independent Police Commission, 2013). Indeed, this was a sentiment expressed to me by several CRCs who wished to have greater powers beyond the confines of the police organisation, which they felt would provide them with more ability to affect crime reduction more broadly.

However, expanding the role of PCCs may come at the price of stretching their capacity to deliver the job. In this study, I found that there were a number of PCCs who were facing significant pressures related to the fact that they had perceived the job in broad terms and had decided to take on a large proportion of the workload alone. As a result, almost half of all PCCs I interviewed made reference to the intensive workload they were facing, several of whom reported working frequent 12 hour days. Alongside concerns about the ability to deliver the job, expanding the role may therefore also have welfare implications, particularly given the age profile of many of the PCCs (at the time of interviews, 38 out of 41 PCCs were over the age of 50, while nearly two thirds [26] were over 60).

This may also have implications for decisions to stand again for election. At the time of interviews (roughly six months in office), four had already ruled out running for the post again - some citing the tiring nature of the job. Given that the re-election of PCCs was supposed to be one of the central planks of accountability over PCCs (see for example, May, 2010), this raises some questions about the ability to hold PCCs to account who have already decided that they will not be standing again. Broadening the role any further in legislation may therefore have impacts on the accountability of PCCs, which has been a key area of concern discussed elsewhere (see for example, Chambers, 2014; Lister, 2014). Decisions to expand the role should therefore be weighed against these potential costs.

The breadth of interpretations of the role is indicative of the novelty of the policy in which PCCs are testing the limits of the role. As one PCC explained to me, "the PCC role is big. No one quite knows yet how big, because we're still defining it and pushing the tent out". But it also

encapsulates the spirit of the reform, which provides flexibility to PCCs to deliver local solutions to policing and crime reduction in the name of localism. This aim, however, should not preclude clear central guidance as to what the job entails, not least because of the implications this may have on the delivery of a democratically accountable policing service - one of the fundamental drivers of the PCC policy.

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