

The learnings for far?

In an 'evolutionary approach to management,' six months is a short time. But initial results are promising on both conventional measures and Cheshire's own. In Runcorn and Halton, where the changes have gone furthest, more staff are available to attend emergencies, more minor incidents are attended so fewer are managed in slow time, and the number of handovers is coming down. Collaboration with mental health agencies has reduced demand in that domain by more than 50 per cent. Repeat calls ('failure demand') have been cut. As the force starts to understand the end-to-end cost of dealing with problems, and how to distinguish between elements of the process that help and those that don't, it is finding, as predicted, that it can deliver better services with fewer resources: cashable savings of £2m are predicted this year and nearly double that next.

This is of course some way short of the need to find savings of £36m over four years off a budget of £180m. But Gerrard is confident that as the new ways of working spread, and understanding demand grows, 'there'll be many more areas where we can identify ways of stripping out waste'. Already, he says, as the role of managers changes from compliance to helping officers solve problems faster in the field (ie make the system work more smoothly) headquarters is emptying and some of the functional support and recording work is drying up. Indeed, Gerrard believes that this new way of working will contribute £20m of cashable savings over the next 4 years.

As it happens, in an atmosphere of imposed cuts, that raises some delicate issues. Increased capacity isn't the same as reduced costs; falling costs are a consequence, a by-product of doing things better, and that may involve deploying the extra capacity to activities which have little to do with arbitrary priorities such as 'visibility' and even – whisper it – 'the front line'. Thus, the big prize is the steady, long-term driving down of demand. That requires unspectacular partnering work with other agencies such as the CPS and social services to attack the root causes behind police demand.

In Cheshire's case, the front line is by definition protected by being built into the overall goal.

But, as Gerrard points out, that doesn't mean that actual numbers will stay the same. Having more bobbies on the beat may drive demand down. Or it may not. Or it may drive demand down in some circumstances but not others. As this emphasises, improvement in systems terms is a long-term learning process.

Even on the early showings, however, with every day that passes, the Cheshire force grows more convinced that it is the exception that for once disproves the gloomy rule. And its sanguine outlook is beginning to make other forces sit up and take notice. Take the Cheshire attitude to the cuts. Of course, materially they don't help, but in underlining that the days of policing as blind obedience to central procedures are over, they put a premium on intelligence, application and public concern – the things that brought applicants, half of them graduates, into the service in the first place. Cuts or no cuts, the challenge of working systematically with citizens and communities to resolve problems and prevent them happening again – to make things better – is one that Cheshire's officers have responded to with a will (incidentally laying to rest the canard that all public-sector workers subscribe to Groucho Marx's 'whatever it is I'm against it' attitude to change). The satisfaction of 'doing the right thing' rather than what the rulebook says occurs over and over in conversation.

"You know, boss, you're in real danger of improving the morale of the constabulary," quipped one officer to Gerrard. 'Quest deskilled people,' says Superintendent Andy Marsden. 'But you're paying them to make decisions, so let them do it.' 'Now we try to get at root causes and sort out the problem so that it doesn't happen again', adds sergeant Elaine Duddle. 'We own our own cases. It gives people pride back in their job.' Gerrard sums it up this way: 'We're well on the way. We know we're doing the right thing – I don't think the staff would let us turn back now even if we wanted to.'

Simon Cauklin

Doing the right thing

Like most of the public sector, the police seemed shell-shocked in advance by the cuts that are about to hit them. 'Rock-bottom' is the Police Federation's characterisation of morale in the wake of the Winsor pay review and a two-year pay freeze. ACPO estimates that 28,000 police jobs will go as a result of budget cuts over the next four years, 12,000 of them officers. Even the Chief Inspector of Constabulary, Sir Denis O'Connor, admits that finding cuts of that magnitude will be 'difficult to secure' without affecting the front line; one ACPO member says baldly it is impossible. Opposition politicians are lining up to agree.

They have a point – if you stick to current management philosophies. But one force refuses to share the gloom that squats over police stations up and down the land. Querying most of the received wisdom about how police work should be managed – indeed how it managed itself five years ago – is not the most comfortable option, agrees Graeme Gerrard, Deputy Chief Constable of Cheshire Constabulary. But he believes his force's initiative – 'the most profound police change in my lifetime' – could redefine policing, full stop. 'We'll fight for it,' promises Gerrard, 'because we think – no, we know – that we're doing the right thing.'

Seven years ago the force would have told a rather different story. Cheshire prided itself on having wholeheartedly adopted the latest mass-production service model (target-driven, IT-enabled, broken down into many specialised functional departments) that has become standard not just in the police but across the whole public-sector (not to mention the private, where it originated).

But initial optimism soon faded as frustration grew with a regime of 'performance managing to the nth degree', which seemed to deliver the opposite what it said on the label: a grumbling public, officers demoralised at being stripped of discretion – and, managers came to believe, mounting rather than falling costs.

It was against this background that Cheshire's top brass got wind of a radically different approach to service that was delivering intriguing results across a range of organisations in both public and private sectors.

Basically, the systems approach seeks to optimise the organisation as a whole rather than as a collection of parts. It stands the conventional process on its head. Instead of starting with central targets and designing the organisation and its work around them (hence all the specialised departments and functions) it begins at the other end by asking what seems an exceedingly basic question: to fulfill our object, who do we need where?

An important strand in the logic of the new approach is that you can't cut costs directly without provoking unintended consequences. On the other hand, the cleverer the organisation gets at meeting its goals – in Cheshire Constabulary's case, defined as 'to make people safe and feel safe' – the more costs fall out of the system as a consequence of the improvement. Cheshire chief constable David Whatton bought this logic. When Theresa May, the coalition Home Secretary, gave the green light for a new departure by scrapping central policing targets, with the full support of the Cheshire police authority he decided to put the promise to the test.

The last six months have been 'a voyage of discovery'. 'Moving from a decade of target-driven performance to one that's about meeting demand is a major culture and change programme,' says Gerrard.

The departure point was establishing what demand for county police services actually was. Like all organisations, public or private, Cheshire thought it knew; as with everyone else, that conviction did not survive the first brush with reality, which was to listen in to 22,000 calls, including 8,000 front-desk enquiries, and analyse them not by the official categories but what people were really asking for.

The findings were sobering.

The first discovery was that 40 per cent of calls on police time were 'preventable', in the sense that they were caused by someone (sometimes the police, but quite often also another agency) failing to do something or to do something right the first time. In other words, if the system worked properly, the reason for those calls would go away. If just a fraction of that 'preventable' demand could be turned off, officers would be freed to carry out more useful activity. They would be doing more with less; capacity would increase.

The second revelation was how little the calls had to do with actual crime. By a distance, the most frequent reason for contacting the police was reporting traffic accidents. Number three was lost property. Anti-social behaviour barely scraped in the top 10. Just 9 per cent of contacts were about recorded crime, or 15 per cent on a slightly looser definition. So broadly speaking 85 per cent or more of police 'demand' was for information or for a referee rather than for police work as usually understood: people were reporting road accidents (compelling completion of forms sometimes 14 pages long) to back up insurance claims rather than asking for investigation or reporting physical injury; in the same way, lost property callers wanted the police to give them a reference number for insurance purposes, not spring into action to get it back.

'We realised that in the past we had been making decisions on very small slices of data,' muses Nick Bailey, Chief Inspector in charge of transforming policing. Even where 'crime' was involved, looking at it in terms of demand rather than as pre-determined units of work found that the official categories often weren't what they seemed. Take a spate of 'shoplifting' from a supermarket. It turned out that the thefts coincided with a marketing promotion that saw cases of beer stacked close to the entrance and the dismissal of the store detective as a cost measure. The perpetrators, meanwhile, were well-known drug or alcohol users. By its own lights the police were doing a good job of quickly picking them up, taking them into custody, charging them and delivering them to court, where they were fined and sent away again (even though the first fine had never been paid).

Two things sprang out from this regular weekly performance. First, Cheshire police was picking up the tab for the private sector's merchandising and HR policies: the store could have stopped the thefts overnight by moving the cartons somewhere else. The internal one was that 'Our people were doing what the system told them to,' notes Bailey. 'We were getting a 100 per cent conviction rate – great! Unfortunately reoffending was running at 68 per cent. So related to purpose, which is stopping things happening again as well as giving justice, it was useless. Nothing we did stopped the reoffending or repeating work for us – we were hamsters on our own treadmill.'

There were many other examples of repeated extra work caused either by police co-option into other agencies' cycles of failure, or by compliance with official categorisations: persistent absconding from a childrens' home, with real drain on police resources, caused by lackadaisical supervision at the home; a 'break-in' that on investigation turned out to be not a crime but a relationship break-down, an estranged ex-boyfriend letting himself into a house to retrieve a mobile phone. (The case went to court: he was hardly likely to reoffend, but under the old criteria a break-in was a break-in – not to mention a detection a detection.)

As the different kinds of demand were teased out, officers quickly realised that because they started from the wrong end, previous 'improvements' were also sources of make-work and non-learning. For example, the Quest programme of streamlining processes within existing silos was a good example of 'doing the wrong thing righter', which actually makes things overall worse, in this case reinforcing fragmentation and the culture of doing just what you were told and passing it on. 'The biggest problem isn't solving things, it's not knowing you have a problem at all,' reflects Bailey. 'We were really good at taking sensible free-thinking individuals and turning them into people who believe you have to do all this stuff for bureaucratic purposes.'

Perhaps the biggest – and most uncomfortable – unwitting source of inefficiency turned out to be the centrepiece of all such production systems, centralised call-handling. 'We'd fallen straight into the trap,' says Gerrard ruefully.

The problem having been defined as a call-handling problem, to which the solution was evidently economies of scale, Cheshire had dutifully put in a huge call centre. It had 'bloody good telephone answering times' – but was unable to resolve the issue that generated the call in the first place. Call-handlers could only pass on the calls to the front end, where they were sorted into 'urgent' or 'slow timed'. From customer service the calls were routed to the neighbourhood sergeants who might have taken them before the call centre was put in, and they passed them on... to a constable to return the phone call. The whole process could take anything from four to 78 days.

Central call-handling is now under 'fundamental review'. But in the meantime call-handlers and problem-resolvers have been sited alongside each other, with immediate results: 'We're now getting a copper to even minor incidents straight away,' says Gerrard. Previously in Runcorn there were at any one time 400 slow-timed tasks waiting to be completed. There are now eight. Decisions are better, and capacity has been freed up for dealing with more important stuff.

Much of what Cheshire is currently doing deliberately rolls back the previous centralising tendencies. Simplifying, localising and giving back officers the power to use their own judgment is intriguing, to say the least, for other authorities which have been moving in a different direction, admits Gerrard. But this is no hunch or gamble. Rather, it is the application of a systematic method for experimenting with new ways of working to better meet the system's goals. To do this, the organisation has had to go back to first principles – indeed, to work out what first principles for its own particular circumstances are.

Some pretty basic decisions were involved. So:

- instead of logging and categorising incidents to fit Home Office classifications, Cheshire has created its own labels based on root causes which enable it to understand demand and eventually drive it down (the shoplifting case is a good example);

- instead of working to response times and targets, the principle is for officers to turn up at the right time to resolve the particular problem;
- instead of chasing crime and incident targets, the force collects end-to-end data that shows how well the system works for communities and thus also functions as a yardstick for improvement;
- instead of following official guidelines on what creates customer satisfaction, it aims to understand what matters to communities and citizens and deliver it as nearly as possible to the first point of contact, so that they feel safe and are safe.

For individual officers, the change can hardly be overestimated. Gone is the requirement to record data that that serves no useful purpose; 'purposeful recording' is the order of the day. Rather than being told what to do and being chased on compliance, their job is to resolve issues on the spot, using their discretion and four guiding principles: what matters to the victim, what matters to the community, the need to reduce offending, and the need to respond to the public interest. The actual measures used vary locally, according to what drives local behaviour. 'Our attitude is: "You sort the problem and tell us how you know whether you're getting better or not," says Bailey. 'It's a real culture change.'

The ramifications are just as important at the 'political' end of the scale. Freeing up the front line to innovate directly around citizens' needs necessarily means paying less attention to officially defined measures and standards, and is therefore something of a challenge to the guardians of policing orthodoxy. Whatton pays tribute to the Cheshire police authority, which has squarely taken on board the implications of the new thinking and is fully behind it in the confidence that in terms of outcomes any contradictions will vanish.