

National Evaluation of the Mini-Police: Summary

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Introduction

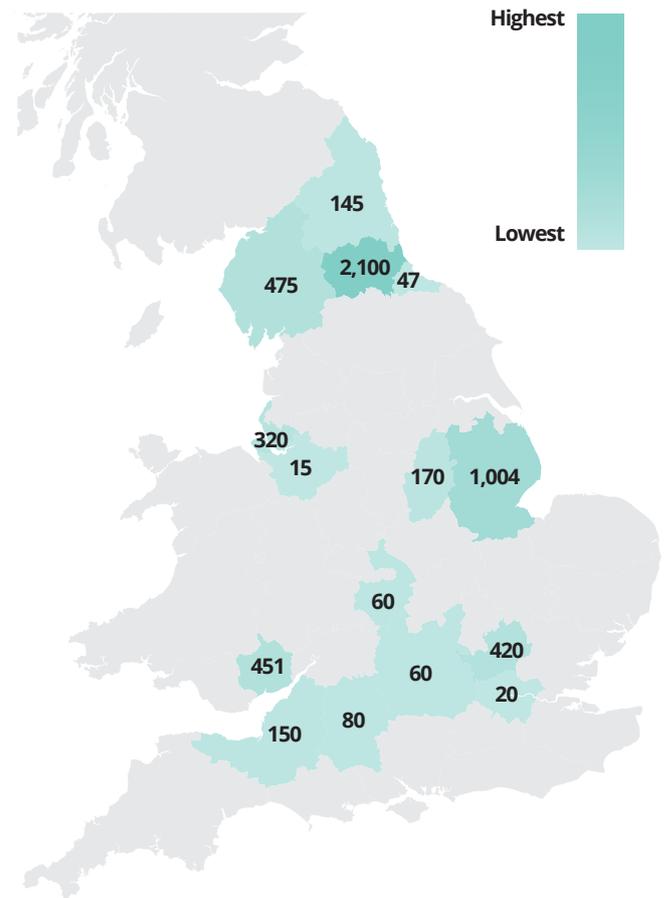
The mini-police scheme is an innovative police engagement programme for school children aged 8-11 years. It was originally conceived in Durham and has since been launched by several forces in England and Wales. The objective of the Durham mini-police initiative was to provide a fun and interactive way

'to introduce children to a positive experience of policing and to get them involved in the local community'.

The Durham model was critical at inspiring other sites to launch their own initiatives, though other sites did not create direct replicas and instead developed their own localised aims and structures for implementation.

Whilst recognising the diversity of mini-police programmes nationally, the aims of all mini-police initiatives resonate with government strategy that seeks to work with children and young people to reduce their risk of becoming offenders or victims; build positive relations between the police and young people; and nurture their feelings of social responsibility so that they become active citizens. Research literature, relating to other police-youth initiatives and other uniformed groups, suggests that initiatives like the mini-police have strong potential to improve police and young people relations; increase community involvement and feelings of civic responsibility; and increase confidence, wellbeing and skills acquisition.

Since its conception, the mini-police has grown considerably over the past few years with there now being 388 mini-police schools across 16 forces, involving some 5,517 children across England and Wales. The evidence demonstrates how this growth has been uneven, with Durham and Lincolnshire having a disproportionately high number of schools and children involved.



In terms of planned growth, an additional 160 mini-police units are planned in the coming year, 16 of which are in four new police force areas and the remaining are additional schools in the 16 forces that already have the mini-police established. It is important that as the mini-police grows, the content and structure of the schemes are assessed, therefore, this evaluation provides a timely starting point for understanding what the mini-police is, how children experience it and what impacts such experiences have on them, their families and their communities.



Children's Perceptions of the Mini-Police

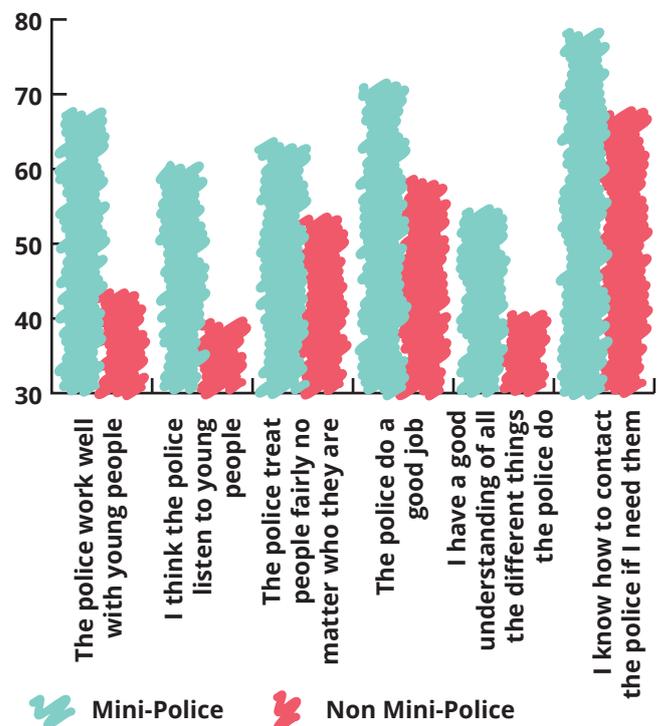
Children's perceptions of the mini-police were captured via a national online survey and case studies in 4 sites across England and Wales. The survey was completed by 350 children from 26 schools across England and Wales. Of the 350 children who participated, 248 (71%) were in the mini-police scheme. Eight child-friendly creative workshops were conducted as part of the case studies, which involved 56 mini-police children.

Children's perceptions of being in the mini-police are very positive. Of the 248 mini-police officers, 77% of children enjoy all their mini-police experiences, with a further 19% enjoying most of their experiences. There was 92% of children that feel their participation in the mini-police increases their understanding of what the police do and 80% or over indicate that it increases their trust in the police, desire to help others, their ability to work in a team and their confidence in the police. Children indicate how they feel the mini-police had a range of positive impacts on their perspectives and values.



Whilst the survey shows that most children (both mini-police and non mini-police) hold positive views of the police, participation in the mini-police appears to have an enhancing effect on children's perspectives with more mini-police children likely to strongly agree with positive statements about the police than non mini-police children. They were also more likely to strongly agree that they have a good understanding of all the different things the police do and how to contact them.

Strong Agreement with Police Perception Statements (%)



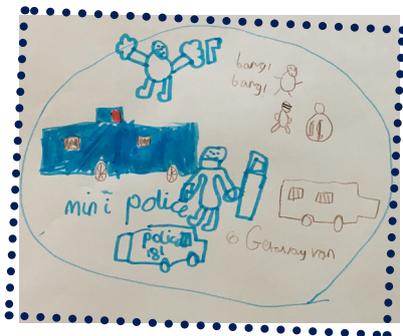
The results show how children in the mini-police were more likely to be aware of, and interested in, volunteer police cadets. Alongside this, children in the mini-police were also more likely to want to become a police officer in the future. It can therefore be argued that participation in the mini-police may act as a catalyst for uniformed police youth programmes, as well as raise aspirations to want to serve in the police.

The evidence from the case studies highlighted that being a part of the mini-police for many children profoundly impacted their self-identity,

as in who they think they are and who they want to be, improving their confidence and esteem. Moreover, the collective identity of the mini-police in schools, involving active and negotiated constructions, often supported a diverse group of children to work together and achieve positive change within the school environment. What appeared to be the most valuable outcome within sites were the positive relationships officers had developed with children who previously had, or who live with family members that have, negative views of the police. Three themes were identified in the analysis of the child-friendly case study workshops: 1. Having fun and doing new things; 2. Learning, helping, feeling; and 3. Connecting with policing.

Having fun and doing new things

Children reported being in the mini-police positively because it comprised a range of fun activities. Membership in the mini-police involved visits and activities to places that they may otherwise not have been. Importantly, the children spoke most excitedly when activities involved encounters with police officers, police dogs or were completed in policing spaces. Having fun and doing new things represents an important part of the mini-police that should not be dismissed, as it represents a critical component of the main attraction to being in the mini-police.



Learning, helping, feeling

The experience of being in the mini-police for lots of children is having important impacts to

the children, especially in terms of confidence, and is enabling the children to make a positive contribution and impact to their community. The value of the mini-police to less confident and socially excluded children is of importance, with the mini-police empowering children within school. It is critical, considering theme 1, that activities are created that both are enjoyable and fun but also inspire children to make a positive difference in school and within the community.

Connecting with policing

The value of the dynamic between the police and children as part of the mini-police programme is important and instrumental to the impact on children's perceptions of policing. Across the sites, children wanted to develop relationships with officers and assume a place of being on their 'team'. The uniforms acted as symbols of a legitimised identity which reflected the values of respect, care and safety. Being in the mini-police improved children's knowledge of what policing involves and, more importantly, that police officers are people who they can connect with.

Adult Perspectives on the Mini-Police

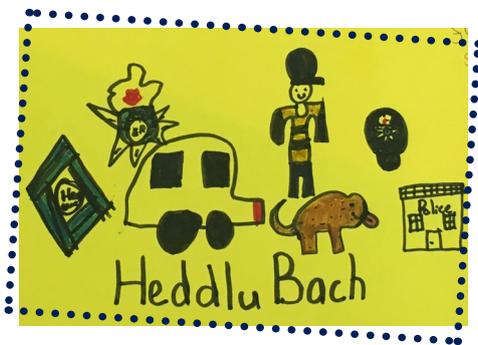
To assess adult perspectives of the mini-police scheme, interviews were conducted with strategic leads across 10 forces and with practitioners and teachers in 4 case study sites. In addition, there were 3 national online surveys for practitioners who deliver the scheme, teachers and staff from the schools involved in the mini-police and parents of children who had participated in the scheme.

Aims and strengths of the mini-police

Adults were asked to specify the aims of the scheme and the extent to which they felt they are being met. It is important to note that although largely similar, sites did vary in

required into what aspects of the scheme are facilitators and barriers to behavioural change. Strategic leads also highlighted the importance of the scheme targeting children at an early age providing an optimum opportunity to influence their perceptions of the police and to direct them away from possible negative behaviour. Some forces were also starting to develop a junior cadets programme to bridge the gap between the mini police and cadets as they were cognisant of the possible loss of positive gains made via the mini-police scheme and the need to maintain a relationship with young people.

Selection, design & delivery



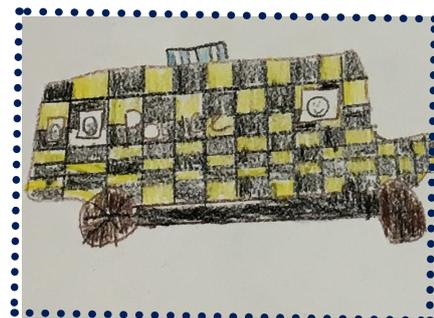
The strategic leads were asked a series of questions about their selection criteria for participating schools and children as well as queried about the design and delivery of the programme.

Selection of schools – There are variations across sites in how schools and children are selected to take part in the mini-police. The method of selection is fundamental in the extent to which the scheme will be successful in achieving its aims. For example, practices such as selecting schools that volunteer may mean given the limitations of resourcing that schools/ children most in need of the scheme are not being offered it. Moreover, such an approach may de-legitimise the value of the mini-police in terms of influencing change in schools and communities that have the most fractured relationships with policing.

Selection of children - Within schools, children that arguably would most benefit from participation in the mini-police may not be selected because they are not putting themselves forward or they are not being selected. Although the extent to which this is the case is not clear, it is critical that vulnerable children in schools are empowered appropriately to create an equitable process of selection. It is important that sites reflect on who they are attempting to involve in their programme and why, as well as what the desired effect is. It is imperative that sites critically reflect on whether their processes are aligned with these aims and principles.

Design & Delivery - Although based on and inspired by the original mini-police scheme, as with the aims, the structure, length and content of schemes vary significantly. For example, they vary in length from 7 weeks to 2 years. As with the selection process, the structure, content and frequency of input of the scheme is likely to impact on the likelihood of the scheme achieving its aims. At this stage there is little evidence to suggest how the different models may impact differently on the effectiveness of the scheme in addressing its aims, but this would certainly be a beneficial avenue of investigation in the future.

The progress of mini-police sites has been impressive and due to the enthusiasm and commitment of key staff in sites. It certainly appears to be the case that the mini-police is in demand and there is no shortage of schools that would like to get involved. Therefore, it is important that forces have a clear criteria and rationale as to why some schools can participate and others cannot.



Weaknesses and Threats

Strategic leads and practitioners were asked to highlight what they considered to be weaknesses to the scheme or possible threats to its success, key themes were:

Skills and confidence of those carrying out the scheme to work with children and understanding of the importance of the agenda in relation to their roles. In some sites it was noted that those carrying out the scheme had been selected on the basis that they would be good at working with children or had volunteered. Some leads found that some PCSOs or officers were apprehensive to facilitate the mini-police either because they are not confident to engage with children or they do not feel that it is part of their role. There is a need to ensure that the long-term benefits of early intervention and building of relationships between children and the police are promoted, especially to middle management and to those on the ground who may be running schemes in the future. In addition, those that are on the ground need to be confident in working with children and young people, and more generally engaging with the community.

School buy-in and ownership. Schemes varied in the extent to which there was onus on the school to administer the scheme. In most of the sites the number of schools is quite small in comparison to the total number of schools in the respective county and, therefore, experiences of engagement with schools has been quite positive. It is important that the offer to schools is clearly defined, as are expectations on both sides and there are clear points of contact. Some areas were finding that some schools were struggling to, or resistant to pick up the scheme and run with it. It is crucial not to define such instances as failures but rather learning opportunities to identify what is different in such schools to inform the selection processes.

Rolling the scheme out too quickly or too broadly. It was clear that many schools are keen to get on board with the scheme, with strategic leads receiving many enquiries from them. However, quite a few strategic leads felt that any dramatic expansion of the scheme was not an option as it would put too much pressure on local policing teams and/or partner agencies. They were also concerned that expansion would mean that it would become difficult to monitor the quality and consistency of the schemes across schools. It is clearly an important issue because lack of sustainability could potentially cause more harm than good to police-school relations and to neighbourhood policing.

Funding. Funding for the scheme tended to have come from either the Force, PCC or VPC or a combination. It was noted that it was difficult to get funding from other sources because the mini-police scheme is not a charity. Although funding was generally not considered a major issue currently it was considered as a potential threat to the mini-police in the future.



Sharing information and national strategy

Strategic leads were largely positive about the concept of a national strategy for mini-police. At present the choice and emphasis on aims has largely been locally defined although influenced by the original aims of the Durham scheme. Providing clarity of aims at a national level, may allow for a clearer direction for the following: selection of children for the scheme; structure

and length of the scheme; ownership of the mini-police scheme; and how the success of the scheme is defined and measured.

Clearly, the structure and selection of schools cannot only be governed by the aims of the scheme but will also be dependent on the resources each force has available as well as their current Service Delivery Model. This is largely why strategic leads were keen to highlight that a national strategy must allow for flexibility in how the mini-police is locally implemented and run. Strategic leads were keen to share information, most had had some contact with a couple of other forces and some had recently obtained access to the portal.



Conclusion and Recommendations

The progress of mini-police sites has been impressive and there is a growing local footprint of the mini-police in participating sites. This evaluation highlights that children and adults involved in the scheme perceive that the scheme is having positive impacts in relation to its key aims. However, further investigation of these benefits is required, particularly in relation to the specific aspects of the scheme that have the most influence on them and the extent to which these benefits have a lasting effect.

The evaluation demonstrates that the mini-police programmes varied significantly nationally, being positioned differently within local policing

environments, having differential levels of investment and resource, having different selection criteria and being implemented using alternative models over dissimilar periods of time. As a result, the authors make the following recommendations in relation to strategy and practice.

Strategy

To define a national vision for the mini-police, supported by a value framework and strategy.

There is a need to agree what the mini-police is as a programme, what it is trying to achieve and how it should develop. It would be beneficial if the mini-police agenda is located within a wider force approach to promote the child-centred policing agenda, to create a culture and environment that facilitates developments.

To mature police-led uniformed youth programmes, designing pathways between mini-police, junior cadet and cadet initiatives.

The evidence shows how participation in the mini-police increases both interest in continued involvement in uniformed police group participation and civic engagement. A larger strategic vision for all uniformed children and youth police engagement (from mini-police age 8 through to cadet age 18) would create continued opportunities for children and young people to both get involved and stay involved.

To establish a guiding framework to inform the selection of schools to be involved in the mini-police.

The selection of schools is paramount to meeting the overall programme aims and objectives. This is the part of the selection process that forces have the strongest ability to influence, being able to identify schools in areas that generate high levels of demand and include communities that have fractured relationships with the police. By

establishing a guiding framework to assist in selecting schools, this will increase the likelihood that the scheme is reaching those children that would most benefit.

To develop a national evidence-base for the mini-police that focuses foremost on the value and social impact of participation on children.

There is a need to embed processes that capture the activities and outcomes for children in the mini-police. Several forces have initiated local evaluative practices, though these are not aligned between sites nor do many include measures relating to impact and social value.

Practice

To encourage child-centred approaches and ideologies, enabling the active involvement of children at setting direction and agreeing issues to be explored.

Encouraging a child-centred approach in which children participate in setting the direction will facilitate the 'child's voice' within strategic and operational development, which positions children as playing an important and active role in the programme, rather than passive recipient of it.

To produce local programme documentation, outlining roles, responsibilities and accountabilities between schools and police.

While the scheme is working well, in some sites there were issues in the understanding of schools of what the mini-police consists of and what the responsibilities of schools and the police are. Local documentation that outlines the 'offer' of the mini-police to schools as well as the commitments needed by the school to develop and sustain the mini-police should assist in the effective running of schemes and ensure that expectations are well managed.

To establish guiding principles concerning the composition and representativeness of mini-police cohorts, in relation to children in need and children who are interested.

It was recognised in many sites that some children who it is perceived would benefit greatly from participation in the mini-police are not engaged or do not engage with the opportunity. The evidence shows the value of achieving a balance and diversity within cohorts, though strategies are needed to better attract specific children for whom participation in the mini-police could intervene early and positively change their perceptions of police.

To create opportunities to share good practice and build a repository of 'what works' locally, sharing information with national partners.

There is a need to create mechanisms to share good practice and resources between sites. At present, many sites were developing materials and approaches independently, duplicating efforts which represent wasted public resource.



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