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## Citation

Fenton-O'Creevy, Mark; Miller, Nicola; Selby-Fell, Helen and Bowles, Benjamin (2024). Policing the pandemic: deciding and acting in the face of uncertainty and the unexpected. In: Dickinson, Helen; Yates, Sophie; O'Flynn, Janine and Smith, Catherine eds. Research Handbook on Public Management and COVID-19. Elgar Handbooks in Public Administration and Management. Cheltenham, UK; Northampton, MA: Edward Elgar Publishing Ltd, pp. 192–205.

## URL

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# Policing the pandemic: Deciding and acting in the face of uncertainty and the unexpected

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This is a draft chapter. The final version is available in Research Handbook on Public Management and COVID-19, edited Helen Dickinson , Sophie Yates , Janine O’Flynn , and Catherine Smith, published in 2024, Edward Elgar Publishing Ltd. <https://doi.org/10.4337/9781802205954>

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# Policing the pandemic: Deciding and acting in the face of uncertainty and the unexpected

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## <a>INTRODUCTION

Although most high impact decisions in the public sector are taken in conditions of deep uncertainty, there is a major gap in research to help decision-makers cope with these conditions. Much advice for decision-makers is relevant to tame problems for which probabilities are calculable and optimal choices modelable (Tuckett, Smith, & Good, 2018). As Boin and Lodge (2016, p. 289) argue, public management scholars have been “*strangely absent*” from debates about transboundary crises and deep uncertainty, focusing largely on “routine processes of governance”. Despite great interest in complex wicked problems there has been insufficient attention to the challenges of public management, faced with the “surprising, inconsistent, unpredictable, and uncertain” (Ansell, Sørensen, & Torfing, 2021, p. 2). In the context of a pandemic followed by a European war, against the backdrop of a climate emergency, this problem of public management resilience in the face of deep uncertainty needs urgent attention.

Uncertainty and the unexpected place a premium on effective sensemaking, constructive doubt (Fenton-O’Creevy & Tuckett, 2021), and what Weick and Sutcliffe (2015) have described, in their work on ‘high reliability organisations’, as ‘collective mindfulness’. In this chapter, we develop insights relevant to the delivery of frontline public services in the face of crisis and uncertainty, drawing on high reliability organisation theory as an organising theme for our discussion of two United Kingdom (UK) police force responses to the pandemic crisis and the relative success of their response.

Significant research has been conducted into how high reliability organisations (HROs) maintain consistent standards of safety and reliability despite complex operations and dynamic environments. These organisations face potentially dangerous consequences of failure but maintain high reliability in their operations, despite frequent unanticipated events (e.g., in contexts such as fighting wildfires, aircraft carrier operations and management of nuclear power stations). As Weick and Sutcliffe (2011, p. 21) note: “Success in working under these conditions is due in part to mindful organizing that allows people to notice the unexpected in the making, halt it or contain it, and restore system functioning. The hallmark of an HRO is not that it is error-free but that errors do not disable it.”

Important elements of policing, such as firearms operations, terrorism and public order response have this requirement for high operational reliability in the face of risks of dangerous failures, complex operations, uncertainty, and the unexpected.

For the Covid-19 crisis, police forces needed to ensure public safety and public compliance with pandemic regulations whilst maintaining public legitimacy. They needed to maintain reliable operations, to combat crime and protect the public, despite the pandemic’s impact on

operational capability. This had to be achieved despite deep uncertainty about how the pandemic, its hazards, and political responses would unfold.

Despite these challenges, an independent review found UK policing to have achieved a largely resilient and successful response to the pandemic. Successful in the sense that forces adapted and innovated rapidly to ensure continued operational effectiveness. They innovated to exploit opportunities presented by the crisis, for example using reductions in street crime to improve operational outcomes in tackling serious crime. They worked to achieve public compliance with pandemic restrictions in ways that largely maintained public legitimacy (HMICFRS, 2020). We draw on HRO theory to examine reasons for success and identify ways that policing and other frontline public services can improve resilience and responsiveness to crisis.

Research into organisations that consistently achieve high reliability in the face of the unexpected suggests they can “respond in real time, reorganizing resources and actions to maintain functioning despite peripheral failures.” (La Porte, 1975, p. 353). To achieve this, Weick & Sutcliffe (2015) argue that these organisations demonstrate collective mindfulness, the collective capability to discern discriminatory detail about emerging issues and to act swiftly in response to these details.

They identify five primary dimensions of collective mindfulness from research, arguing that HROs are: -

1. Committed to resilience (the capabilities needed to detect, manage, and recover from errors and the unexpected);
2. Reluctant to simplify (avoid simplifying information and unexpected events into familiar categories too quickly);
3. Sensitive to operations in an evolving situation (anticipating and noticing what is actually happening regardless of intentions, designs, and plans);
4. Preoccupied with failure (paying attention to weak signals indicating vulnerability to problems and hazards); and they
5. Defer to expertise regardless of hierarchy.

In this chapter, we draw on our empirical research to review the extent to which the policing organisations we studied, as they responded to the pandemic, were characterised by these elements of collective mindfulness, and draw on HRO theory to frame lessons for the future.

## **<a> RESEARCH METHODS AND CONTEXT**

Our study draws on detailed interviews with sixteen<sup>i</sup> senior officers and staff in two (of 45) territorial UK police forces, conducted between October 2020 and March 2021, and engagement with the twenty-four member forces of the Open University Centre for Policing Research and Learning, including a workshop on emerging findings with member representatives in April 2021. The forces studied comprise a large metropolitan force (Metro) and a smaller force with significant rural and coastal policing (Rural)<sup>ii</sup>, chosen as having major differences in size and in the challenges they face.

The UK model of policing reflects a largely decentralised approach with forty-three regional forces across England and Wales, each led by a Chief Officer who has direct responsibility for operational policing decisions. Each of these forty-three forces are governed by a locally elected Police and Crime Commissioner (PCC) who holds the Chief Officer to account and sets the strategic objectives and the force budget. Each of the forces has their own autonomy of decision making within some constraints. The two centralised forces of Scotland (Police Scotland) and Northern Ireland (Police Service of Northern Ireland) have different governance arrangements.

The research was carried out within an ‘engaged scholarship’ approach (Van de Ven, 2007). In such research, researchers are partners with the decision-makers, who are involved throughout the research process. Together tailoring the work to make it useful for their ongoing practice and mindful that outputs match their needs. The focus was the experience of senior policing leaders in navigating the crisis, deciding, and acting in the face of deep uncertainty.

### **<a> DELIVERING POLICING OPERATIONS WITH HIGH RELIABILITY IN A CRISIS**

We frame our findings through the lens of HRO theory and Weick and Sutcliffe’s (2015) account of the five elements of collective mindfulness. We now consider each of these elements.

#### **<b>Commitment to Resilience**

Allenby and Fink (2005: 1034) define resilience as “the capability of a system to maintain its functions and structures in the face of unexpected events and to degrade gracefully when it must”. Other definitions of resilience often add the ability to rapidly learn and grow in the face of disruption.

The two forces studied largely demonstrated these capabilities during the pandemic. Mostly reliable service was maintained, with careful protection of core services. There was both top-down and bottom-up innovation in response to new demands, and periods of reduced street crime were exploited to achieve core goals such as supporting vulnerable groups and tackling serious and organised crime. Careful attention to prioritisation of key services through a red-amber-green rating approach, supported planning for graceful and planned degradation of service should the need arise.

Two important capabilities underpinned this resilience. Both forces had well-practiced capabilities and routines in strategic command of major and critical incidents and had leaders and workforce familiar with facing uncertainty and the unexpected on a regular basis.

*“Dealing with critical incidents are what we do the best ... There is no calmer environment than us being hit with a panic ...”* (Metro)

Many interviewees emphasised the role of values in navigating uncertainty, mentioning both policing and personal values and the role of a National Decision Model for policing which

places ethics at the heart of decision-making processes (College of Policing, 2014). The most mentioned was the principle of ‘policing by consent’. This was core to policing public compliance with Covid regulations in the UK.

Since the foundation of modern British policing by Robert Peel in 1829, this ideal of policing by public consent and minimal reliance on force, has been a core value expressed in the still enduring principles for UK policing (Home Office, 2012; Reith, 1956).

Very early in the crisis the ‘four Es’ approach to enforcement of Covid-19 related regulations was developed by the National Police Chiefs Council (NPCC). This mandated that, faced with unprecedented restrictions on public freedoms during periods of lockdown, officers should adopt a staged approach to breaches of regulations, first *engaging* with members of the public, *explaining* the rules, *encouraging* compliance, and only taking *enforcement* action as a last resort.

*“We were conscious of not wanting it to affect our relationship with our communities because policing by consent is a very treasured part of our policing approach.”* (Metro)

While some tension developed with public, media, and political pressure for stronger enforcement, this principle remained important. This values tension between political pressures for strong enforcement and policing by consent has been a constant theme since the establishment of “modern”<sup>iii</sup> British policing (Taylor, 2016).

Despite these strengths, our analysis identified three issues worth attention in ensuring future resilience: preparation for crises, the limits of strategic command approaches, and the resilience of the wider public services system that policing is part of.

### <c>1. Preparation for crises

A common view among interviewees was that prior work on contingency planning and pandemic exercising had been of very limited value in responding to the pandemic:

*“We looked at our business continuity plans and [none of our] plans really reflected what we thought we were facing.”* (Rural)

There was an important alternative perspective offered by one officer, who suggested that what was of considerable use was not the plans that had been made, but knowledge from multiple contingency planning processes, (including planning for Brexit) which led to a detailed understanding of operational interdependencies, such as the operation of key supply chains:

*“[Prior continuity planning] was incredibly useful because it gave us that immediate understanding of which elements of the force we could close down, what are the critical dependencies ... [And] it really brought to light the supply chains and the risk that sits within the supply chains.”* (Metro)

This is an important insight. In business continuity planning and exercising, in contexts of significant uncertainty it is the planning process not the specific plans which may be more valuable. Good anticipatory thinking is often less about planning based on forecasts than expert bets on what to pay attention, to make sense of an evolving situation (Klein, Snowden, & Pin, 2011). There is a premium on the ability to entertain constructive doubts about how a situation has been understood, whilst acting decisively, but with willingness to revise understandings and plans (Fenton-O'Creevy & Tuckett, 2021).

The problem with risk-register style approaches to continuity planning for future crises, is that they can encourage singular hazard scenarios with an unjustified level of specificity. For example, before the pandemic the UK government's national risk register of civil emergencies (Cabinet Office, 2017) identified a pandemic as its top risk but this was specifically identified as an influenza pandemic risk with contingency planning strongly influenced by this assumption.

There is an important lesson about preparedness for policing and wider public services. The most important use for risk scenarios is to use many potential crises of different natures to test current capabilities and to improve understanding of the kinds of capability development that improves resilience to wide ranges of threats and hazards, including those still unforeseen.

This places a premium on exercising and business continuity planning in a way that fosters capturing and disseminating knowledge that may be relevant to a much wider set of events than were considered in the process, rather than just situation specific plans. The utility of this approach is illustrated by the value of Brexit planning for understanding supply chain issues in the different context of a pandemic.

Despite the concerns about effectiveness of prior pandemic plans, gaps in planning were quickly recognised and addressed, not least through the rapidly engaged strategic command approach. Although, as we now discuss, faced with these unusual challenges, strategic command capabilities came under significant strain.

## <c>2. The limits of strategic command capabilities in a crisis of highly extended scope and uncertain duration

The strategic command approach, first developed in 1985, is a central feature of UK policing and one adopted by other frontline public services. This incident command approach has three levels of command: strategic (Gold), tactical (Silver) and operational (Bronze). Bronze commanders lead operations on the ground in response to operational objectives set by Silver commanders, who are charged with the overall running of an incident response. Gold commanders, for serious incidents, have strategic oversight of the incident and set tactical parameters for Silver and Bronze command. For major incidents, they chair the (often multi-agency) strategic command group. Senior officers have significant training in and experience of strategic command, and UK police forces have well developed systems and protocols to support these processes.

This expertise was essential in enabling a rapid and resilient response to the pandemic crisis. However, as the crisis progressed, capabilities came under significant strain. Strategic command approaches tacitly assume a time-limited context for critical and major incidents. This assumption has been severely tested by the pandemic, leading to impacts on physical and mental wellbeing for those in command roles, with multiple participants emphasising the impacts on wellbeing.

*“Police leaders, everyone thinks they are really strong and super resilient, we can go on forever. And you can’t.” (Metro)*

*“The first two Bronzes both went off with stress/depression. They are making... life impacting decisions and the guidance was changing on a daily basis.” (Rural)*

Another key issue concerned the difficulty of drawing boundaries around the ‘incident’. The pandemic affected almost all aspects of policing. Early on, the chain of strategic command for the crisis response came under significant pressure with both forces seeking urgent guidance, and decisions being requested on many aspects of ‘business as usual’ in these unusual circumstances.

*“It felt at times like on top of my day job I was running the [whole force], because it felt like everything I was doing was setting direction for how the entire organisation would run. ... you just can’t do it.” (Metro)*

Whilst the strategic command approach was a crucial element of policing resilience, there is also important learning about the boundaries of this capability. Processes need adaptation in the face of crises of extended duration to support the wellbeing of those in command roles and attention should be given to defining boundaries of command responsibility where those crises are of extended scope.

### <c>3. The resilience of the wider system

Organisations depend for their resilience on the wider system they are part of. For policing Covid-19, this included multi-agency working and relationships with politicians and media. Most participants reported good and deepening relationships with partner organisations through the crisis, not least through local resilience forums. However, concerns were raised about the capabilities of partner organisations in responding to major incidents, leading to pressure on policing representatives to lead on issues which fell outside their core expertise. As one officer described:

*“There is [a need to review] the wider system and the support the government bring to that system to support us in a future crisis...” (Metro)*

There were questions about the role of government communication. Policing organisations are used to both policy churn and political and media scrutiny, but the intensity and pace of both were unusually high during key periods of the pandemic, and this combined with sometimes unclear and contradictory messaging from politicians.



*“We don’t make the laws ... we have to interpret them. ... we sometimes had less than 24 hours to actually interpret that law operationally and legally and then apply it.” (Metro)*

*“[Ministers misinterpret their own guidance in press conferences] ...a lot of it is very much in the media gaze and in the face of quite strong political pressures as well.” (Metro)*

Whilst public accountability is important, intense external scrutiny and scapegoating, from politicians, media, and publics, can reinforce cultures of blame within policing organisations. As we explore below, reinforcing blame cultures leads to the wrong kind of preoccupation with failure. It risks reducing the ‘conceptual slack’ needed to respond effectively to the unexpected.

In summary, organisational resilience is not just a property of the individual organisation, it also emerges from the effective functioning of wider networks and partnerships. In the public sector, resilience can also be harmed by failures of political communication and control.

### **<b>Reluctance to Simplify**

As the heart of ‘reluctance to simplify’ is the concern that fixing a story of ‘*what is going on*’ too early, often leads to becoming stuck in a single story, using ready-made frames and categories and their accompanying operational policies and practices. Such stories develop their own momentum and can drive inattention to cues that don’t fit the narrative (Fenton-O’Creevy & Tuckett, 2021).

Perhaps aided by the unfamiliarity of the circumstances senior officers found themselves navigating, there were indications of early willingness to stay with the confusion and complexity of events and keep updating understanding. For example:

*“There were quite a lot of examples of the thing that we thought we were doing is not producing the effect that we hoped for. So, if I think through my [Covid-19] strategy, I wrote version one [but] by the time I handed over to [X] after 8 weeks we were on about version nine or ten.” (Metro)*

A key capability that helps HROs avoid becoming stuck in an oversimplified single story is ‘*conceptual slack*’ - the availability of a sufficient diversity of perspective, and openness to different perspectives, avoiding the tendency to treat new situations as just another version of the routine and familiar. Research on HROs highlights the importance of informal networks in containing crises (Weick & Sutcliffe, 2011). In a command-and-control structure where decision dialogue is typically up and down a chain of command, there are often questions of where diversity of perspective comes from. Some resolved this through reliance on using ‘critical friends’ as a sounding board.

*“...with experience, you phone a friend. Critical friends in this environment are huge. [My opposite number in a neighbouring force] and myself were*

*having almost regular calls ‘what do you think? how?,’ just to get a feel for about how that group think around things.” (Rural)*

This included getting perspectives from partner organisations. Although, some felt this happened less, because of a tendency to have an inward focus.

In highly hierarchical organisations, generating sufficient conceptual slack can be challenging. This challenge is recognised in many military organisations, leading to forms of leadership training and doctrine that seek to ensure the conceptual slack associated with sufficient diversity of perspective, and attention to context, in interpreting policies and orders (see e.g., Clarke, 2017 on ‘intelligent disobedience’). Some concerns were expressed that suggest strategic command structures and practices could reduce conceptual slack and encourage too rapid simplification and convergence to a single story, under the pressures of this highly extended crisis.

*“[We] don’t necessarily always consult widely enough or we don’t necessarily consult the right people, we don’t necessarily look at... where it might be working better ... or learning from other organisations. ... we are quite impulsive and want to make decisions and want to make them quickly.” (Metro)*

Especially in crises of extended duration, strategic command practices would benefit from structures and tools that enhance and embed rapid lateral consultation and seeking greater diversity of perspective.

### **<b>Sensitivity to Operations in an Evolving Situation**

Decades of work practices research show a mismatch between formal operating procedures and actual practices (e.g., Brown & Duguid, 1991; Carvalho et al., 2018). No set of rules can foresee the complexities of real, messy, working reality even in mundane operational tasks, never mind amidst the challenges of an unfamiliar situation. All work requires some degree of improvisation and moment-to-moment adaptation to achieve its goals. Policies and procedures may also be bypassed or acted on in a ‘tick box’ way for other reasons, including misunderstanding, work pressure, or competing directives.

Sensitivity to operations is concerned with maintaining current awareness not of what ‘should’ be happening but what *is* happening operationally. It requires sensitivity to weak signals that events may not be unfolding as expected and effective communications channels and practices that avoid blaming the messenger or disregarding information that is inconsistent with current assumptions.

A common theme in interviews was the value of experience as a firearms<sup>iv</sup> or public order commander<sup>v</sup> in managing the dynamic and uncertain situation presented by the pandemic. Participants emphasised the value of their prior experience of needing to stay alert to the unexpected and continually update their understanding. Most also emphasised that the pandemic generated unfamiliar challenges so prior assumptions did not hold. As one senior officer described:

*“When I was a firearms commander ... you always knew what the threat was, whether it was an individual, a weapon. You would go through things like what the capability was, but with Covid we didn't really know what it was, and we didn't know how it would impact on the organisation.” (Rural)*

Nonetheless, efforts were quickly made to ensure effective information on the operational impacts of the pandemic and regularly update contingency planning. For example, setting up HR rapid reporting processes on sickness levels, identifying and (red, amber, green) rating which critical services were at risk, establishing truncated training schedules, and identifying qualified staffing capacity to ensure coverage of critical services.

Strategic command approaches did largely succeed in ensuring sensitivity to operations in the pandemic. However, an important question for police forces may be whether capabilities for sensitivity to operations needs extending beyond the context of critical and major incident strategic command to the longer-term management of policing.

#### <b>Preoccupation with Failure

Preoccupation with failure is not about an obsession with past failures, nor about blame. It is about systematic alertness to small cues that events and the consequences of actions may be unfolding differently to expected (Weick & Sutcliffe, 2015). One way of understanding this capability is as ‘sensitivity to vulnerability of operations.’

In policing, the preoccupation with the potential for failure is manifest in the strong focus on risk assessment, risk mitigation and contingency planning. This was evident in policing responses to Covid-19, with early effort devoted to identifying priorities for protecting policing functions, contingency planning and risk and threat assessments.

However, there were blind spots. It may be that the very success of the strategic command model meant that less attention was paid to how it could be adapted in the context of a crisis of extended duration and scope. First, while attention was given to workforce wellbeing, it is less evident that sufficient attention was paid to the potential for burnout in senior roles. Second, there is evidence that officers can be prone to preoccupation with failure in a less helpful sense; making defensive decisions to minimise the potential for future blame.

Defensive decisions-making occurs when decision-makers choose an option that is not best for the organisation's goals but is likely to avoid negative personal consequences if things go wrong, or alternatively push decisions upwards to avoid accountability (Artinger et al., 2019).

Officers of public organisations are rightly held accountable for their decisions and thus reasonably focus on recording defensible reasons for decisions. In UK policing the ‘National Decision Model’ (NDM: College of Policing, 2014) is a core tool for decision-making, with a code of ethics at its heart, and was frequently mentioned in interviews. Whilst for some it was seen as useful for ensuring all important aspects of a decision had been reviewed, for others it was primarily a tool for recording a defensible basis for decisions:

*“Whether it leads to better decisions? I would listen to argument, but it certainly leads to more defensible decisions.” (Metro)*

Tomkins, Hartley, and Bristow (2020: 101) note in their discussion of leadership challenges within policing, that “police leaders both expect and experience more responsibility than control; more blame than praise; and interpretations of failure based more on personal fault than on situational or task complexity”.

Much police decision-making during the crisis was the subject of intense scrutiny from media, the public, and politicians. This could exacerbate fear of blame and a tendency to turn making defensible decisions into defensive decision-making.

*“...sometimes people make wrong decisions in good faith with catastrophic outcomes and then society wants to punish people if they make judgement errors. ... nobody will want to make decisions if every time they get something wrong, they are going to be, [punished] either they will cover up their mistakes or they won't make the decisions in the first place.” (Rural)*

*“They were getting enquiries that frankly should have been dealt with at sergeant level, coming into [senior] level or my level and it just got ridiculous ... it almost felt like they just wanted me to say that's ok, so if it all went wrong it is not them it's me that's got that responsibility”. (Metro)*

Strong capabilities in risk assessment and mitigation, and contingency planning clearly contributed to sensitivity to operational vulnerability to failure. We also identify the risk of blame cultures contributing to defensive decision-making, a problem that can be particularly prevalent in public sector organisations (Artinger et al., 2019).

### **<b>Deference to Expertise Regardless of Hierarchy.**

Faced with new threats, HROs typically have structures and routines in place that migrate decisions to people and teams with appropriate expertise, regardless of formal hierarchy (Chassin & Loeb, 2013). This includes the rapid assembly of informal groups to bring appropriate knowledge and expertise to bear on unexpected problems.

Rigid reliance on hierarchy, in command-and control-based organisations can be problematic for developing these kinds of lateral informal and adaptive approaches, which depend on bypassing formal hierarchical structures. Nonetheless, policing organisations develop formal and informal mechanisms for identifying and using diverse sources of expertise in decision-making and rapid response to incidents and the unexpected.

In the two forces studied, one mechanism for deploying appropriate expertise to the demands of the pandemic was greater integration of police staff<sup>vi</sup> in the strategic command structure, albeit that this required significant adaptation to new ways of working for many police staff.

Another concerned the development of approaches to rapid consultation. For example:

*“Normally in HR policy, by the time you have written it, consulted it, passed it around, checked it, it is sort of six months ...What we had to do was condense the consultation period, into a few hours rather than a few months.” (Metro)*

Although there was some use of lateral networks to increase diversity of perspective, some felt the constraints of operating in a command-and-control focussed hierarchy meant that diversity of perspective could be limited, leading to oversimplification:

*“[There is] this desire to bound everything, [and] not deal with the wicked things, only deal with the simple things. ...Police officers generally aren't used to dealing with nuance they deal with black and white and those things that are black and white are things that they have been told to do, ...the hierarchy works against us in that way; because you get told to do things much more than in other organisations.” (Metro)*

While the use of advisers to strategic commanders and use of lateral networks does increase conceptual slack, there is scope for expanding the range of perspectives available to commanders in crises of extended duration.

## **<A>CONCLUSIONS**

In the face of unexpected events generated by a global pandemic and at times disorganised central government communication and coordination, the forces studied achieved a largely successful, resilient response. They adapted and innovated rapidly to ensure continued operational effectiveness. They innovated to exploit opportunities and worked to achieve public compliance with pandemic restrictions in ways that largely maintained public legitimacy.

In concluding, we draw on HRO theory to frame our findings on key factors underpinning this success and key lessons that can be drawn for policing and for the wider public sector.

### **<b>Factors supporting success**

A clear element of crisis performance was a *commitment to resilience*, underpinned by well-practiced capabilities and routines in the strategic command of major and critical incidents, and leaders and workforce practiced in facing the unexpected. This included well-practiced, dynamic approaches to risk assessment and mitigation, and the development of accelerated innovation, consultation, and policy-development processes. The core role of values of British policing were a valuable resource for resilience and navigating uncertainty. Specifically, the central role of policing by consent in supporting and engendering the cooperation of communities with extensive restrictions on their freedoms.

Another factor concerned *reluctance to oversimplify* narratives about the unfolding challenges police leaders faced and a willingness to remain open to what Fenton-O'Creevy and Tuckett (2021) call constructive doubt. This was exemplified by a mindful approach to

revising plans and strategies as the crisis evolved and the use of strong core values to navigate uncertainty.

Strategic command approaches did largely succeed in ensuring *sensitivity to operations* in the context of an evolving pandemic, innovating to insure timely and relevant information about pandemic impacts on operational capabilities. This was underpinned by leaders' experiences, in domains such as public order and firearms command, in managing dynamic and uncertain situations. It was supported by early efforts to ensure rapid and timely information flow on how current operational capabilities were being impacted. Although we raised questions about whether this sensitivity to operations was mostly confined to strategic command processes.

*Sensitivity to operational vulnerability* manifested through a strong focus on risk assessment, risk mitigation and contingency planning, with much early effort devoted to identifying priorities for protecting core policing functions, contingency planning and risk and threat assessments.

Finally, while it was not clear that policing organisations routinely show *deference to expertise*, regardless of hierarchy, the informal use of lateral networks played a significant role in increasing diversity of perspective and conceptual slack.

#### **<b> Learning for the future:**

Prior pandemic exercising and contingency planning produced plans that were of little direct help. However, forms of exercising and contingency planning not directly focused on pandemic planning, produced relevant capabilities and knowledge.

Crucially, faced with uncertain futures, there is a premium on modes of planning which support the capability to monitor and adapt rather than predict and plan (see e.g., Stults & Larsen, 2020). The value of planning for specific contingencies and exercising for specific hazards and threats may be less in the specific plans they produce than in the ways they expose organisational capabilities to a wide range of tests; generating understanding and improved capabilities which are relevant to a wide array of situations, including yet unknown challenges. It is notable that understanding about police supply chain issues during Covid-19 came out of planning for Brexit. There would be significant benefit in planning exercises and the ways in which learning is captured from them, with this insight in mind: that the true value of multiple simulated-incident exercises is less plans for specific hazards or threats, than in building preparedness for the unexpected that is robust to a wide range of threats and hazards.

Despite the crucial role of strategic command capabilities in enabling crisis resilience, there were signs that this mode of operating may require adaptation for major incidents of highly extended duration and scope. It is worth questioning, whether the very success of strategic command capabilities in policing might create a blind spot in relation to the need to significantly adapt this mode of organising for unbounded crises of extended duration. Given the role of strategic command approaches across frontline UK public services this need for adaptation may have much wider application.

Public agency crisis management approaches tacitly assume bounded scope and duration. A clear lesson of the pandemic is that these assumptions should be re-examined, and attention paid to future scenarios in which crises are of extended duration and scope.

The difficulties in drawing boundaries around the Covid crisis and its duration placed significant stress on the wellbeing of those in the chain of command reducing conceptual slack in command teams. Concerns were expressed suggesting hierarchical policing command structures and practices could, sometimes, reduce conceptual slack and encourage too rapid simplification and convergence to a single story, under the pressures of a crisis. This question of the role of conceptual slack in public sector crisis responding lies at the heart of debates in the crisis management literature about the relative value of hierarchical forms of incident command versus coordination approaches which emphasise looser forms of network-based collaboration between agencies and between units, especially as scale and complexity increases (see e.g., Chang 2017; Christensen et al., 2016).

All public bodies should be accountable to their publics. However, intense media and political scrutiny, especially when accompanied by a simplistic hunt for scapegoats, can contribute to cultures of blame within public management. These conditions increase the risk that a focus on making defensible decisions shifts to a primary focus on protecting reputation and avoiding blame rather than achieving operational goals.

Some important challenges to resilience have also come from the embeddedness of policing in a wider system, not least from the pace of policy churn and inconsistent messaging from government. The policing experience highlights the need to develop better government communication and coordination practices during national crises.

### **<b> Lessons for public sector frontline resilience**

While this chapter has focused on the specific context of UK policing, we believe that some of the lessons have important broader implications for public management resilience to crisis. First, we highlight the value of an HRO theory frame for frontline public services, especially in the context of increasingly uncertain futures.

Second, we highlight an important lesson about contingency planning. Over-specific plans for forecast hazards are likely to be ineffective. The value of exercising and planning based on future scenarios does not lie in the utility of specific plans but in the knowledge and capabilities they develop to respond to a wide range of unexpected threats and hazards. This insight requires different approaches to capturing learning from exercising and scenario-based planning.

Third we have highlighted the role of strong core values, as a guide in the face of unexpected crises. Shared values around ‘policing by consent’ supported rapid agreement and rollout of the largely successful 4 Es framework for pandemic policing.

Fourth, we highlight the role that political, public and media scapegoating can play in reinforcing cultures of blame that risk appropriate attention to making accountable decisions shifting into defensive decisions made to defend against future blame.

Finally, the very success of proven capabilities can create a reluctance to question the need to adapt those capabilities in the face of new kinds of challenges.

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<sup>i</sup> One officer was less senior but chosen for the specific role they played.

<sup>ii</sup> We provide only this limited description of the two forces to protect their anonymity.

<sup>iii</sup> Normally taken to date from Robert Peel's reforms

<sup>iv</sup> UK police officers are not routinely armed. Policing operations involving firearms are conducted by authorised firearms officers and overseen by senior officers trained and certified in command of such operations.

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<sup>v</sup> Public order commanders are senior officers trained and certified for the command of policing operations which concern events and incidents which present a risk to public safety or have a potential for serious disorder (for example major protest marches, large football matches).

<sup>vi</sup> UK police officers have a distinct legal role, with legal powers beyond those of other citizens. Other police force employees are referred to as police staff (e.g. finance, HR, information analysts).