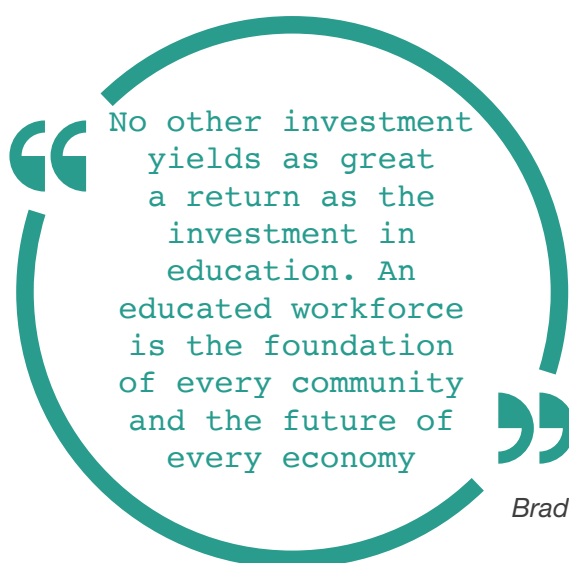


HIDDEN INSIGHT 15:
RETURN ON INVESTMENT



This insight considers the return on investment that can be achieved through investing in a community engagement programme. It considers the benefits that are achieved for staff through a long term reflective training programme that enables staff to test their learning and the opportunities that are gained through listening to local communities. This develops trust and confidence between statutory agencies and communities empowering local people to participate in the development of increased social capital and improving the quality of life for local communities.

*#Return on investment #Investing in training #Listening to communities #Building social capital
Reflective training #Community engagement*



Return on investment is a popular phrase in the public sector as it deals with the impact of the austerity measures. The activity conducted (investment made) must yield a return (benefit) if there is to be justification for continuing the investment. The social return on investment (SROI) is arguably even more important when we think about public services: big decisions and new operating models will inform how we mitigate the negative social impact of cuts in service. SROI enables the public sector to incorporate the social, environmental, economic and other values into decision-making processes

Over the past 15 years the public sector has invested time in creating a 'customer' service – one that uses branding and communication tools with a high visibility presence to influence an individual's perception of the service. The investment in surveys, PACT meetings, Community meetings and so called 'engagement' type operations must be examined as financial pressures are realised. The social capital of a community must be invested in if the return is to negate the impact of the cuts.

Consideration should be given to the return on investment of public sector service delivery within the context of community engagement. the following examples of operations give the police an opportunity to speak to members of the public, they are often prescriptive in the solution offered, or they offer a one off initial contact, with signposting for future enquiries:

- marking of bicycles
- anti shoplifting operation.
- visiting large numbers of houses as an introduction to neighbourhood teams.

When applying the NPIA (2012) definition of community engagement;

'The process of enabling the participation of citizens and communities in policing at their chosen level, ranging from providing information and reassurance, to empowering them to identify and implement solutions to local problems and influence strategic priorities and decisions. The police, citizens, and communities must have the willingness, capacity and opportunity to participate. The police service and partner organisations must have a responsibility to engage and, unless there is a justifiable reason, the presumption is that they must respond to community input.' (NPIA 2012)

it is apparent that referring to such operations as 'community engagement' is a misnomer.

We are not advocating or suggesting that operations such as those shown above are discontinued: they have a part to play in the relationship between citizens and communities, perhaps under the context of the wider police role of crime prevention. However, the return on investment in terms of building social capital will be limited.

Social Capital

The work of Field (2008) and Putnam (1993) focused on the social good that can be created by people working together to achieve what they can't achieve alone. Like all other capital, social capital can be profitable if the right investment takes place. The 'profit' for the police, statutory agencies, and wider society is the realisation of the aspirations of the Peelian Principle set out below.

'To maintain at all times a relationship with the public that gives reality to the historic tradition that the police are the public and that the public are the police; the police being only members of the public who are paid to give full-time attention to duties which are incumbent on every citizen in the interests of community welfare and existence.' (Lentz and Chaires, 2007)

Field argues that unlike economic capital '...social contacts are not easily reduced to a simple set of common denominators' (Field, 2008; 14). Within a policing context, former Chief Constable Sir John Alderson said that the police need to develop a new relationship with communities, one which makes them feel safer. This poses a challenge to the way in which the police train and support their frontline officers. Often delivered away from the force and/or through one-day training programmes, the detailed learning required for the development of social capital is not easily reduced to a one day course, and is arguably better delivered through a process of reflective practice.

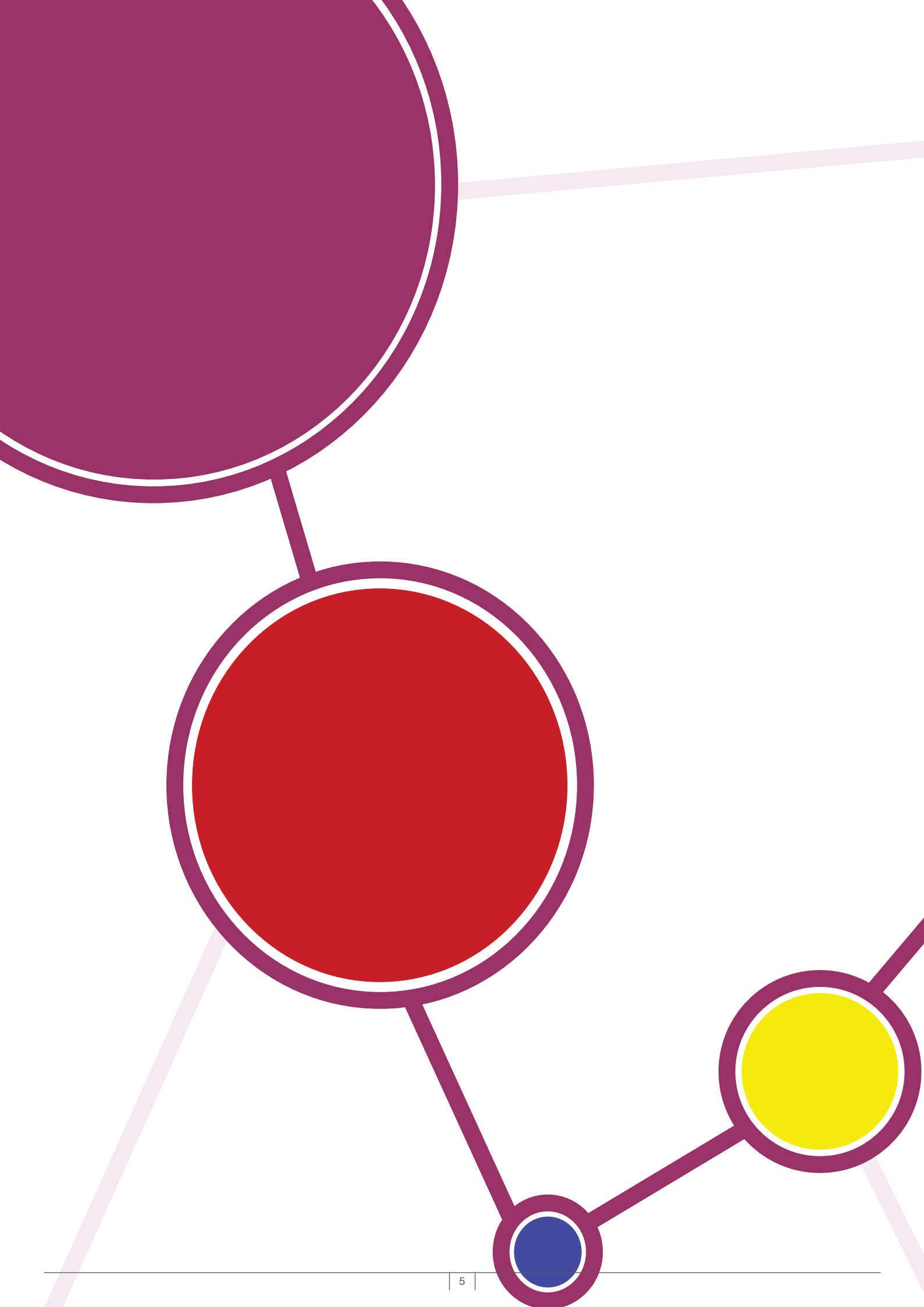
Delivered over a six-month period, the programme spaces learning over time so that long-term retention minimises the problem of forgetting (Thalheimer, 2006). Informed by experiential learning (Kolb et al., 1984) and the skills required to be a 'reflective practitioner' (Schön, 1984) frontline officers are encouraged to test their learning and develop new knowledge and skills to create social capital in their geographical area. At each stage they are asked how this is different to what they usually do in terms of 'community engagement' so that the learning is "...the process whereby knowledge is created through the transformation of experience" (Kolb et al., 1984; 228).

Detailed, reflective learning is uncommon in the frontline of forces but can have a huge impact on their activities, approaches and morale. We have regularly heard officers talk about the results of this programme being 'what they joined the job for'. This wasn't confined to police: council and housing officers spoke of the same feeling. They became conscious of their own biases that informed their activities, and conscious of the passion and abilities that sit in communities: they didn't need to fix them, they needed to unleash their passion.

The programme outcomes surprised the academics as much as the officers who were delivering a new style of engagement:

- Significant reduction in crime
- Significant reduction in ASB
- Significant increases in the potency of a community
- Comment from community member *“Most of the topics covered sparked ideas of how to use this learning in a variety of scenarios and I put this knowledge into practice almost immediately.”*
- Individual and collective community action by those who are normally considered to be ‘disengaged’ or ‘hard to reach’.
- Better police-public relationship.
- Increased morale of those involved

The programme has helped Police forces build more social capital in the communities they serve. This needs regular investment to ensure it becomes a regular feature of the way in which the police work; they can’t revert to type or they will risk losing the benefits of their hard work. And more importantly they will lose the trust of the communities they worked so hard to engage.



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