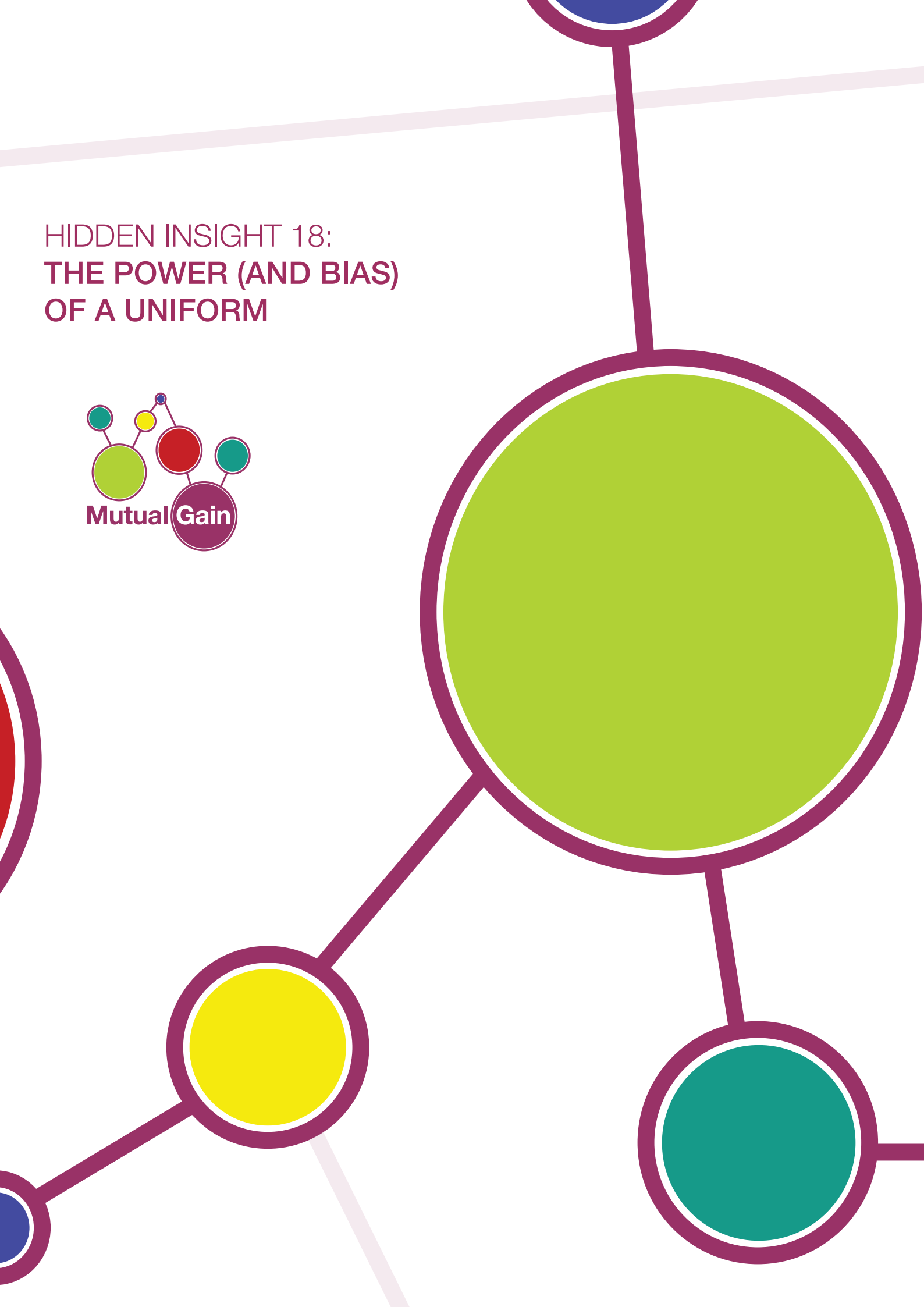


HIDDEN INSIGHT 18:
THE POWER (AND BIAS)
OF A UNIFORM



This insight considers the appropriateness of police officers wearing uniform when engaging with members of the public. It recognises that there are times when it is necessary for police officers to wear uniform but identifies opportunities and benefits that can be realised by not wearing uniform in some engagement scenarios when the wearing of a uniform may present barriers to open discussion and restrict the opportunities to build trust and confidence.

*#Wearing uniform whilst engaging #Power of a uniform #Building social capital # Neighbourhood policing
#Community engagement #Community consultation #Breaking down barriers*

The British police uniform is a global branding success. What would Marks and Spencers' or John Lewis give to have a brand that is instantly recognisable and instantly associated with a positive image? How many times do officers get stopped by tourists and asked to pose for a photograph with families?

The police uniform was carefully thought out in 1829 by Sir Robert Peel and his first two police commissioners; Sir Charles Rowan and Sir Richard Mayne. Peel wanted a uniform that was distinguishable from the militia; a softer more approachable uniform which would encourage the public to talk to them and ask for help.

In September 1829 the first of the 'new police' stepped onto the streets of London wearing a long blue waistcoat, blue trousers and a tall black hat. Police officers of the day were provided with a pair of white trousers to wear in the summer months and a lamp to enable them to see during hours of darkness.

A lot of consideration went into the design of the uniform which was provided by Charles Herbert. A high collar was provided to prevent the police from being garrotted - a favourite method of attacking police officers at the time. A company called Parker supplied 1,000 rattles, batons and handcuffs, but they had to be kept out of sight in an inner pocket so as not to frighten people. Initially Inspectors were also provided with cutlasses and pistols. The whistle did not supercede the rattle until the 1860s, and it remained an essential part of the police uniform for many decades thereafter.

The police uniform didn't change a great deal until the early 2000s when high visibility jackets were introduced. The fluorescent jackets enabled the public to see the police, and allow colleagues to see each other in crowds. Perhaps the only other significant change has been the introduction of the stab proof vest. Even these, when first introduced, were designed to be worn covertly under the shirt rather than on top of the shirt.

Over time the police have rightly become proud of wearing their uniform: when the public are asked about crime they regularly demand more police walking the beat. The police are the authoritative body that use their powers to keep us safe. This is supported by the current Home Secretary who states the police are the fundamental basis of our society. The public know and love the uniform, but what are the implications of it and its associated power when police embark on meaningful community engagement?

Community engagement is another type of social research: it requires the same skills, draws on some of the same techniques (surveys, focus groups etc.) and seeks to capture the authentic voice and experience of those engaged. Providers of community engagement pride themselves on adhering to a code of conduct where confidentiality and independence is paramount. The police want their officers to conduct meaningful engagement, which means some of the usual organisational norms and behaviours have to change to capture the authentic voice of the community. The police are all too aware that the community are their eyes and ears and they want to build a refreshed relationship with those they serve. But the uniform can sometimes be a barrier to that. Imagine that you live in a street where your neighbours are involved in a lifestyle of criminality and/or possibly violence. You want to stop crime and keep your family safe - maybe your child is involved in, or on the periphery of, criminality or anti social behaviour. You want it to stop and you wish the police would 'just do something about it'. Currently your opportunity to influence the way you are policed is:

- [Contact the call centre or stop an officer who is patrolling to give you information on your child/partner/neighbour activity](#)
- [Complete a survey which the PCSO's conduct at your door](#)
- [Attend a Gala event](#)
- [Attend a PACT meeting](#)
- [Write to your local councillor or your local MP](#)

Police and PCSOs (and housing and council officers) often complain that the public just don't want to engage with them; that numbers are low or it is the same people turning out. It is well known by social researchers and independent providers of community engagement that the public do want to engage but they are suspicious and nervous about the implications and associated repercussions of 'speaking to someone in authority', despite the good intentions and the friendly nature of the individuals delivering the engagement activity.

Those working in the public sector often express their frustration at knowing the community has information and experiences which can be acted upon but they won't talk or act with those that can help. MutualGain has worked with police officers to break down those barriers and were prepared to take off the uniform!

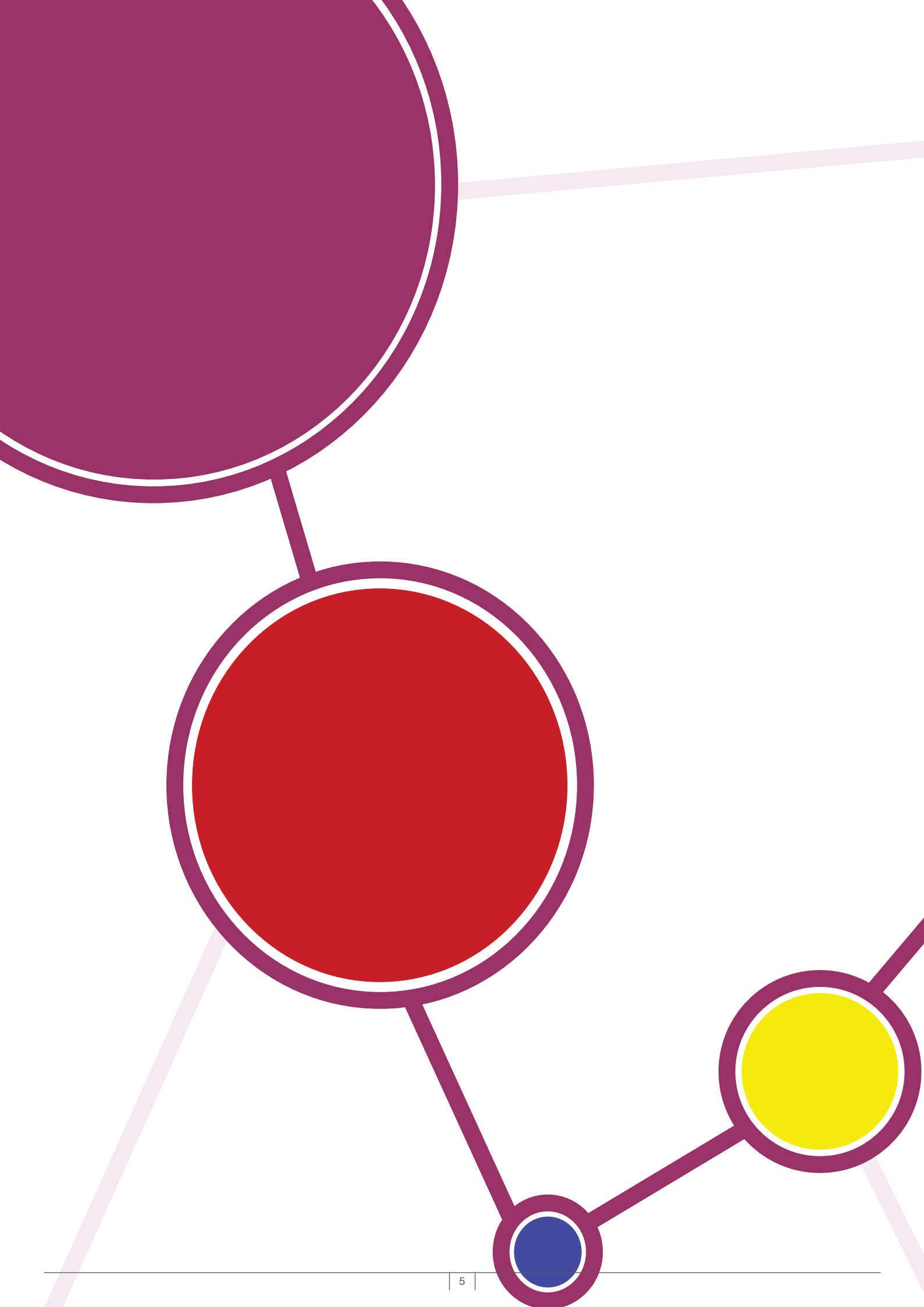
During the period that MutualGain has been working with the police there have been a number of occasions when the police were encouraged to remove their uniform, particularly with the recruitment to, and facilitation of, community events. Often officers wore non uniform and acted as facilitators alongside people from partner agencies and members of the community. Despite it feeling odd and contrary to what they believed was 'right' the advantages of not being in uniform at community events became apparent.

In the planning stage of one of the early events a constable went door knocking with a member of the community to encourage people to attend. Door knocking is not new or unusual but doing it in a uniform may have repercussions for the resident; whilst they may love the police, they want them off their doorstep ASAP for fear that they may be perceived as a 'snitch' or a 'grass'. The fear of reprisal was removed when the officer recruited with one of his active community members and was out of uniform. In this case the police officer and member of the community were invited into many of the houses and people wanted to share experiences and information. At the end of the day the police officer had recruited almost 30 people who committed to attend the event and wanted to work with him.

The events were attended by a Superintendent in uniform. This was the correct thing to do as they were the host of the event representing the police, and as we know the community like the authority that the uniform brings; they like to see that someone in charge will be doing something with the information shared. All other officers acted as facilitators on tables with members of the community and they did not wear uniform. The result was a free flow of information about the area that people lived in and how they thought that it could be improved.

The uniform would have been a barrier to the conversation. The fear from some officers is that the community might be upset or feel deceived when the facilitators revealed themselves as police officers or PCSOs at the end of the event. Nothing could be further from the truth. The participants built a relationship with the officers and saw them as people who also wanted to make a positive change to the area - people, not officers. The authoritative barrier had gone and the community sympathised with the challenge they have in tackling crime; they could see that community relationships are key to helping resolve crime and enjoyed having informal (but structured and documented) dialogue with those in authority.

Of course there has to be a balance. There are times when wearing uniform is essential and appreciated, but there are times when engaging with communities when taking your uniform off can have a positive impact too. As the Peelian Principles state ***“Police, at all times, should maintain a relationship with the public that gives reality to the historic tradition that the police are the public and 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 upon every citizen in the interests of community welfare and existence.”***



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