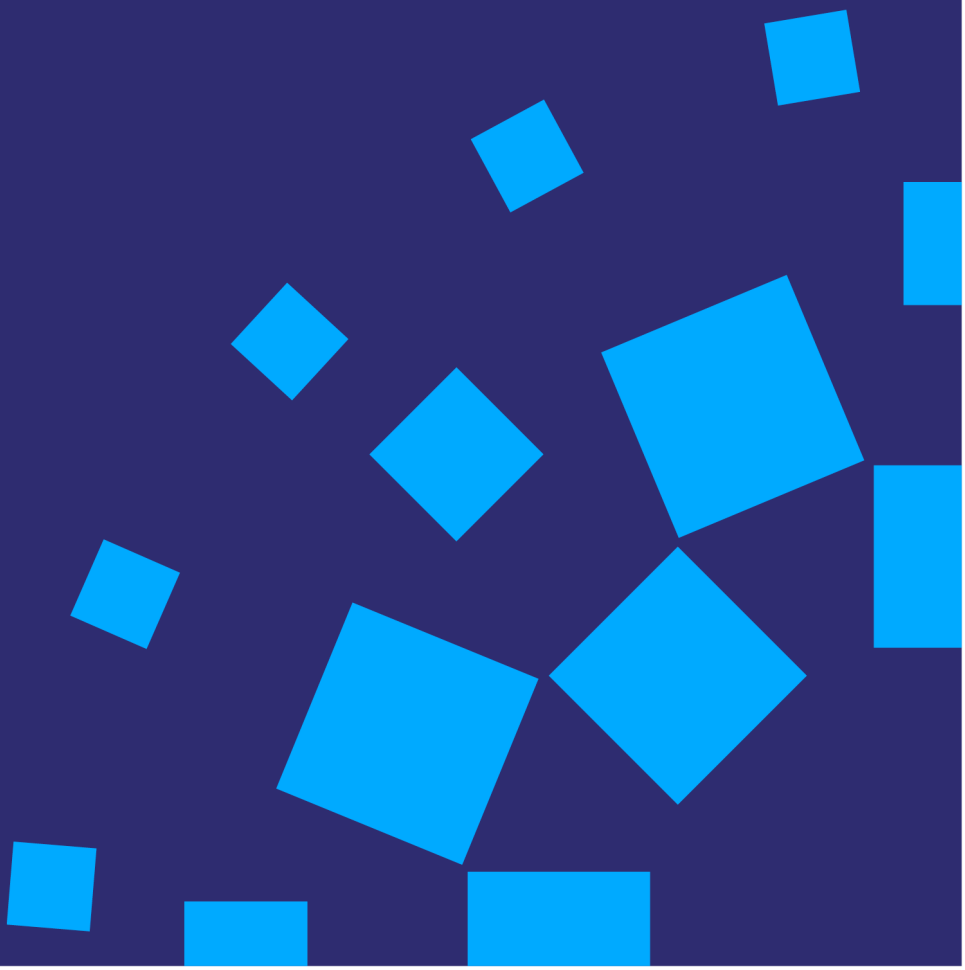
College of Policing

Working together to keep people safe

Code of Ethics

Practice evidence summary

January 2024



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1. Introduction and methodology

This report sets out the findings from the practice review undertaken by the College guideline development team, which:

- focused primarily on the policing principles within the overall Code of Ethics
- explored and reviewed existing codes of ethics, conduct or practice from a range of sectors and organisations
- reviewed existing national and local policing models and frameworks – for example, individual force values statements, the national decision model (NDM), the competency and values framework
- explored current views about the policing principles contained within the existing Code of Ethics, how they were used, their fitness for purpose and any need for change
- explored the implementation strategies and best practice used for embedding ethical codes in a range of organisations

A range of engagement activities were undertaken with police officers, police staff and volunteers, in addition to a review of current grey literature, policy documents and online materials. Further details of the sources considered can be found in Appendix 1.

While the practice evidence represents the views of multiple individuals, it does not represent a review of practice in every force in England and Wales. Although opportunities to participate were communicated to each force and through a range of communications methods, participants were self-selecting. There is therefore a risk that the voices of those who felt most strongly will be over-represented in the findings.

2. Key findings

- There were varied views about what the principles should represent and should be used for, ranging from acting as a ‘set of rules’ to describing a shared moral purpose (3.1.1).

- There was some confusion about the status of different elements of the current Code of Ethics, and in relation to forces' individual ethical and values frameworks (3.1.2).
- While some practitioners felt that the existing policing principles were effective, others felt there could be fewer or different principles (3.1.3 and 3.1.4).
- Integrity and honesty were the principles that were most frequently considered to be important. They were often described as forming a foundation on which all other principles should be built (3.1.4).
- Practitioners emphasised that the principles should be presented in a way that is clear and consistent (3.1.5).
- A range of factors and tools were identified to support implementation of any revised principles. Practitioners particularly emphasised the importance of leaders and supervisors, as well as the need to embed the principles through participative engagement and practical day-to-day examples (3.2).

3. Findings

3.1. Review of the principles

3.1.1. Purpose of the principles

Practitioners had varied views about the overall purpose of the policing principles. Some believed that the principles were intended to **prescribe behaviour**, by setting rules about how policing practitioners should perform their role or conduct themselves. As such, the principles could be used to hold practitioners to account and to sanction them. Some saw these rules as also providing protection for the practitioner – if they act in accordance with the rules, they would be protected from negative consequences.

Some practitioners considered the principles as a **baseline of behaviour**, setting the minimum of what policing professionals should or should not do.

Some practitioners viewed the principles as **inspirational**, providing a template for the ideal professional. In this respect, the principles were seen as qualities that a new professional would develop after joining the police service. Many found the

emphasis on the Code of Ethics within their force to be punitive rather than inspirational.

Some practitioners felt that the principles described a **shared moral compass**. For some, this reflected how anyone should behave, regardless of their job or role. For others, this acted as a shared set of high-level values and principles specifically for those working in policing, to reflect the trust that the public puts in them.

Some practitioners raised the need for the principles to act as an important **signal for the public** of what can be expected from the service and how they should be treated by the police. The notion of policing by consent formed part of this rationale, as people working in policing need to reflect the values and rights that the public believes in.

Several practitioners said that their ethical values were an innate part of their **personal identity**, which aligned with the policing principles rather than being influenced by them. As they considered their values to be innate and unchangeable, this suggested that the principles did not influence their values or change their behaviour. As a result, they speculated that where people had values that did not align with the Code of Ethics, the Code of Ethics was unlikely to make any difference to their values and behaviour.

3.1.2. Confusion with other ethical and behavioural frameworks

A small number of practitioners said that their force had its own set of ethical principles or a mnemonic or strapline relating to ethical behaviours. In each of these cases, they considered the force's message to be simpler and more readily recalled than the principles in the Code of Ethics. Where a force has its own principles or strapline, practitioners talked about greater burdens on their learning, memory and ability to apply them. They were often confused as to which took precedence, particularly where their force focused messaging on their own code rather than the College of Policing's Code of Ethics.

This was reinforced by the findings from inspections by His Majesty's Inspectorate of Constabulary and Fire & Rescue Services (HMICFRS), which identified forces creating and using their own values and mission statements alongside the Code of Ethics. This was considered by HMICFRS to have led to confusion among officers and staff over which took priority.

In interviews, it was apparent that there was some conflation in practitioners' minds of the standards of professional behaviour (SPBs) and the policing principles. Some practitioners mentioned that people did not understand how the two differ. When people were asked about the Code of Ethics during interviews, some practitioners automatically turned to the SPBs in the printed Code, while others only discussed the SPBs until prompted to talk about other aspects of the Code.

> '[…] the standards of professional behaviour receive far more space in the Code of Ethics than the policing principles and that's a real shame because it creates the impression that it's the standards that come first and the policing principles are a bit of an afterthought and of course that was never the intention.'

Many practitioners discussed the emphasis in their force on the SPBs and, as a result, felt that the importance of the policing principles was getting lost. They mentioned that this seemed to be reflected in the Code of Ethics, as there was more content on the SPBs (15 pages) than on the principles (one page). This emphasis was also felt to reflect the cultural prioritisation of behavioural sanction, with a possibility that this undermined the positive, aspirational intent of the principles. As a result, several practitioners suggested separating these two sets of material.

3.1.3. Views on the current principles

Many practitioners felt that the current principles were effective and already worked for policing. Others suggested that the principles didn't need to be revised but did need to be better applied, understood or embedded in policing. These practitioners felt that the nine principles gave sufficient coverage of what is required from policing across a range of contexts. However, others considered nine principles to be too many, making them difficult to retain, recall and employ within decision-making.

> '[…] it just feels like there's too much in there to actually retain on a day-to-day basis, and it's not really clear what the important thing is.'

Practitioners gave their opinions on the relative importance of specific existing principles over others. Each of the nine principles was considered as the most important by at least one participant, with the most frequently mentioned being

integrity and **honesty**. These two principles were frequently mentioned as forming a foundation on which all other principles should be built.

Some practitioners highlighted principles that they considered to be:

- lacking in applicability to all policing roles
- too obvious
- difficult to apply in a working context
- asking too much of practitioners

Examples given included applying the principle of honesty in a covert context and the potential conflict between selflessness and an individual's wellbeing. Many practitioners suggested that, to them, selflessness meant a dedication to work over their own basic needs, such as food and rest.

The most frequent feedback related to the perceived ambiguity of certain principles, with requests for better descriptions and explanations to reduce this. However, a small number of practitioners felt that this ambiguity was appropriate, as it allowed the principles to be used in a way that would reflect a specific situation. The need for practical and tangible examples, as well as operational, tactical and/or strategic context, was felt to be important here.

3.1.4. Potential new principles

Over 50 codes of ethics, conduct or practice were reviewed, predominantly from UK policing and law enforcement, health and social care, local government, business, accountancy and research. These codes were then analysed to identify common principles and values. A total of 90 principles and values were identified. The 10 most frequently mentioned were:

- integrity
- accountability
- respect
- fairness
- honesty
- leadership

- professionalism
- impartiality
- openness
- selflessness

Interviewees also suggested several new or alternative principles for future iterations of the Code of Ethics. The most common suggestion was **empathy**. Empathy was described as being compassionate, recognising and responding to people's emotional states, and both having and demonstrating emotional intelligence. Active listening was also frequently mentioned when discussing empathy. Practitioners recognised that they often encountered people at a point of crisis and that it was important to respond to the whole person, not just to the current incident. They also recognised that there would be limits to practitioners' understanding. While practitioners can try to appreciate a person's lived experience, they do not share this and may never fully comprehend it. Practitioners emphasised the need to show empathy both to the public and to colleagues.

The second most frequently mentioned potential principle was **courage** (or bravery). Practitioners recognised the need for operational staff to sometimes demonstrate physical bravery but also placed strong emphasis on the need for moral courage. This was most often described as the courage to challenge colleagues, especially when more senior, and/or to challenge the organisational culture.

The following potential principles were also frequently suggested.

- **Reflection or learning from mistakes**: This was mentioned by practitioners in relation to a perceived need for a culture that better embraces learning from experience, rather than focusing on failings and blame. HMICFRS's inspection reports also emphasised the role of discussing ethical issues or dilemmas in promoting such a culture.
- **Resilience**: Described as managing demands and doing the right thing, even when under pressure.
- **Competence**: Described as making decisions from an objective evidence base, as well as understanding and addressing any gaps in knowledge.

- **Inclusivity**: Having an inclusive approach was considered to be a key facilitator to adopting all the other principles.
- **Leadership**: Described as leading by example and setting the expectations of other practitioners. The importance of the principles being adopted by leaders and supervisors was emphasised, with senior leaders in particular being expected to embody the principles, set an example and encourage everyone to challenge those who don't behave as set out in the principles.

Although not suggested as a principle in itself, there was a strong call for driving cultural change through a greater focus on **professionalism**.

3.1.5. Clarity and simplicity of the principles

As well as analysing the most commonly used principles in codes of ethics, conduct and practice from across different sectors, we reviewed how they were structured and how the accompanying content was used to explain and illustrate the key messages and principles. Generally, the codes followed one of the following formats.

- Single-word descriptive principle (for example, 'integrity'), followed by an explanatory paragraph of expected behaviours or actions (78% of examples reviewed).
- Short description of expected behaviours or principles (18% of examples reviewed).
- Summary sentence or descriptor followed by detailed explanations (4% of examples reviewed).

Most codes then included more detailed descriptions outlining expected behaviours and guiding values statements. Some codes also contained a decision-making mnemonic, such as the **SELF test**.

- **Scrutiny**: Would your decision or behaviour withstand scrutiny and be seen as appropriate by others?
- **Ensure compliance**: Does your decision or behaviour comply with the code and other police policy, general instructions and procedural expectations?
- **Lawful**: Is your decision or behaviour lawful?
- **Fair**: Is your decision or behaviour fair and reasonable?

Linked to this use of mnemonics, practitioners talked about their wish to be able to learn the principles, so they can be recalled and understood easily and used in practice without needing to refer to a document, which was impractical when making quick-time decisions. In this context, the inclusion of nine principles and the overall length of the College's current Code of Ethics was considered too much. It was suggested that having fewer, more clearly expressed principles would help to resolve this.

3.2. Implementation

The review of practice from other sectors suggested that the following might help in the implementation of a revised Code of Ethics:

- participatory development process
- strong ethical leadership
- guidance materials (including practice examples and dilemmas)
- effective processes, such as monitoring, enforcement and establishment of ethics committees
- clear dissemination strategy
- creating a compliance culture (for example, whistleblowing and reporting mechanisms)

Participants shared their experiences and insights on how the current Code of Ethics was disseminated, implemented and embedded by the College and forces, and provided suggestions to support any revision. These are discussed below.

3.2.1. Leadership and supervision

HMICFRS's inspections identified the importance of leaders:

- setting the ethical culture of the force
- serving as role models
- acting as good sources of guidance regarding ethical dilemmas, including engaging in practical discussions on ethics
- supporting and developing an open culture that placed less emphasis on apportioning blame

Practitioners emphasised that any revised Code of Ethics would need full buy-in from senior leaders in forces, who would need to demonstrate and role model ethical decision making in practice. Some practitioners felt that one way to achieve this would be for senior leaders to be more open in communicating the rationale for the decisions that they make.

Practitioners also felt that leaders should take more opportunities to recognise and reinforce positive, ethically aware decision making, rather than focusing on poor behaviours. Practitioners expressed being comfortable with the need to be held accountable for their decisions and actions, but stated that this needed to be in a context of support and reassurance, rather than undue criticism and blame.

Practitioners particularly emphasised the importance of supervisors in supporting ethical behaviour, as they were felt to be more likely to be able to role model behaviour on a day-to-day basis and to offer quick time feedback on decision making. Practitioners also believed it was important to see supervisors demonstrating ethical leadership and behaviours in a variety of contexts. Supervisors who were open, approachable and accessible to the people they supervised were felt to be more likely to encourage discussions on ethical behaviour and dilemmas that would support practitioners to make high-quality decisions.

There were some concerns that changes in technology and working practices reduced exposure to potential role models and the opportunities to witness how leaders challenge unprofessional behaviour. There was some feeling that training on a new Code of Ethics should focus primarily on supervisors, who could then use their influence to spread ethical development across the work force. Practitioners also emphasised that role models don’t necessarily need to be in a management role.

3.2.2. Embedding the Code in the organisational culture

Some practitioners felt that the Code of Ethics was not embedded at the centre of everyday policing. Instead, they felt that it was often only engaged with at specific points in a policing career, such as on recruitment, during probation and when applying for promotion. While practitioners supported specific development activity at these points, some also emphasised the importance of having regular opportunities to refresh knowledge across an individual’s career in policing. It was suggested that the length of the existing Code of Ethics was a barrier to this.

In order to fully embed the Code of Ethics in the organisational culture, practitioners felt that it was important for the principles to be relevant to people at all levels, by demonstrating the link between actions and decision making. Approaches that were suggested to achieve this included participatory engagement using real-world scenarios, examples, dilemmas and on-the-job feedback. Participants reflected on how discussions on the NDM were more regularly included in briefings, debriefings, recruitment processes, appraisal conversations and tutor debriefings with student officers, among other processes. It was felt that these processes could easily be adapted to include more explicit discussion of the policing principles, which sit at the centre of the NDM.

Participants also emphasised the need to engage practitioners on a personal level, so they are able to appreciate the value of applying the principles in their own practice. This again supported a participatory approach, where practitioners were given real opportunities to reflect on how they might apply the principles to their daily decision making. An emphasis on online learning in some forces was not felt to align with this need. Participants commented that active or interactive training would support practitioners in gaining more insights. Varying the modality of training was recommended, to help spark and sustain people's interest and to be more inclusive.

3.2.3. Supporting practitioners to challenge poor behaviours

Practitioners emphasised the need for organisational support when they observe and challenge poor behaviours. There were some views that challenging poor behaviour had potential personal consequences, particularly when challenging more senior individuals or the organisational culture as a whole. Practitioners did not feel there was clarity about the issues that supervisors can deal with, or that they should refer to professional standards departments or to more senior managers, and asked for more guidance on this.

3.2.4. Communication and knowledge building

Interviewees were asked about their awareness of any resources and communication methods previously or currently used to promote the Code of Ethics, as well as any approaches that they would wish to see. Many practitioners recalled the initial publication of the Code of Ethics being promoted but could not remember

seeing anything since. Some practitioners felt that more recent information and guidance was prioritised over the Code, with a typical comment being that ‘it's really difficult to find now because it's old and there's something else new to do.’

There were a wide range of different approaches to communicating the Code of Ethics across forces, and in their visibility and daily prominence to practitioners.

> ‘It's hanging from the ceilings in certain hallways, corridors. It's in our headquarters. It's referenced in a lot of communications, the Code of Ethics, and it's always covered in our baton and cuff refresher every year as well. It's gone through in quite a lot of detail as well.’

Examples of communication and development material available to practitioners included:

- dedicated intranet pages
- inclusion in induction material
- posters in buildings
- email briefings
- professional standards department roadshows
- ethical committees and panels (with variations in governance and membership)
- team-based or web-based discussion of ethical dilemmas (including videos)
- annual integrity health checks carried out during professional development reviews
- a decision-making framework to support practitioners in using the principles in investigations
- online training packages
- inclusion in the police constable entry routes and National Vocational Qualifications
- training on promotion to sergeant
- integration within other training programmes, such as Taser training

Many practitioners commented that when communicating about the Code of Ethics, the focus was predominantly on misconduct or when things had gone wrong. Some

suggested that there was potential for more learning if practical examples and case studies also focused on positive actions and behaviour. There was also a suggestion for sharing examples of where the Code of Ethics had been ‘demonstrably upheld in the presence of an easier and viable alternative’.

Other suggestions for implementation support, not already discussed, included:

- personnel signing up to the Code of Ethics, perhaps through pledge events
- ethical passports
- a national policing ethics centre
- inspection and auditing of forces to review how senior leaders were embedding an ethical culture based on the principles
- providing reminders of the principles in daybooks or pocket notebooks, as well as other material used on a daily basis
- designing the Code of Ethics to look different from other guidance material, so that it would stand out more
- green and red cards of behaviour
- using role play in development activities

Appendix 1: Sources

What	Types of staff or forces	Number of people	Author or facilitator	Year	Title
Twitter discussion event	-	64	#WeCops	2022	-
Interviews	-	52	-	2022	-
Report	-	-	College of Policing	2014	Ethics and values: Ethics of professional policing (notes aimed at learners completing initial training to meet the learning outcomes specified on the National Policing Curriculum).
Report	-	-	Committee on Standards in Public Life	2015	Tone from the top: Leadership, ethics and accountability in policing.

PEEL inspections	All forces in England and Wales	-	HMICFRS	2020	PEEL: Police effectiveness, efficiency and legitimacy 2018/19.
IOPC investigations	-	-	Independent Office for Police Conduct (IOPC)	2022	IOPC investigations.
Police Chief Magazine	USA	-	International Association of Chiefs of Police (IACP)	2012-2022	Various articles and papers.
Report	Australia	-	New South Wales Public Service Commission	1997	Guidelines for developing and implementing a code of conduct (New South Wales Public Sector Agencies Personnel Handbook, Chapter 8: 'Model code of conduct').
Publication	-	-	Segon M and Booth C	2015	**Values-based approach to ethical culture: A case study**. Ethics, Values and Civil Society, pp 93–118.

The following key frameworks used in policing were reviewed:

- **Association of Chief Police Officers (ACPO) integrity model**
- **Peelian principles**
- **Code of Ethics 2014 reading list**
- **Competency and values framework for policing**
- **Police oath of attestation**
- **Risk principles**
- **European Convention on Human Rights**
- **Authorised professional practice (APP) on the NDM**
- **Canadian Association of Chiefs of Police ethical framework**
- **Home Office ethical decision-making model**
- Force mission, vision and values statements

Appendix 2: Codes included in the review

Policing and law enforcement

1. Police Service of Northern Ireland Code of Ethics 2008
2. Police Scotland Code of Ethics
3. Values and Standards of the British Army 2008
4. Code of Ethics for the Garda Síochána 2005
5. ACPO Code of Ethics
6. National Crime Agency Code of Ethics
7. United Nations Code of Conduct for Law Enforcement Officials 1979
8. European Code of Police Ethics 2002
9. Hong Kong Police Code of Ethics 2009
10. Jamaica Constabulary Force – Ethics and Integrity Policy 2011
11. Maltese Code of Ethics
12. New South Wales Police Code of Conduct and Ethics
13. New South Wales Police Statement of Values
14. New South Wales Standards of Professional Conduct
15. New Zealand Police Code of Conduct
16. Queensland Police Service – Standard of Practice 2011
17. Queensland Police Service Integrity Framework
18. Victoria Police Code of Conduct
19. Western Australia Police Code of Conduct 2010
20. The British Colombia Police Code of Ethics
21. International Association of Chief of Police
22. Berkshire Fire Authority Code of Ethics
23. The Fire and Rescue Service Code of Ethics

Health and social care

24. The British Psychological Society – Code of Ethics and Conduct 2009 and 2018

25. The Code of Ethics for Social Work 2014
26. Nursing and Midwifery Council – The Code – Professional Standards of Practice and Behaviour for Nursers, Midwives and Nursing Associates 2008 and 2015
27. Code of Conduct for Healthcare Support Workers and Adult Social Care Workers in England 2013
28. British Association of Counselling and Psychotherapy 2018
29. National Association of Social Workers (USA) – Code of Ethics
30. Professional Association for Social Work and Social Workers – Code of Ethics 2018
31. British Association of Counselling and Psychotherapy 2018
32. Royal College of Physicians 2020
33. General Medical Council Good Medical Practice
34. NHS Code of Ethics
35. Ontario College of Social Workers and Social Service Workers
36. Public Health Ethics in Practice (UK Public Health Skills and Knowledge Framework)
37. World Health Organization Code of Ethics and Professional Conduct 2017

Local government

38. Standards Matter – A review of best practice in promoting good behaviour in public life 2013
39. Scottish Commission for Ethical Standards in Public Life
40. Code of Conduct for Members of Local Authorities in Wales
41. UK Law Society Code of Conduct
42. Code of Practice for Victims of Crime in England and Wales 2015 and 2020
43. Civil Service Commission Code of Practice for Staff 2010
44. Government of Canada Public Sector Code of Ethics 2012
45. Code of Conduct for the Queensland Public Service 2011
46. Western Australia Public Sector Code of Ethics 2008

Business, accountancy and research

47. Chartered Financial Analyst Institute
48. Chartered Institute of Management Accountants
49. Institute of Chartered Accountants in England and Wales
50. International Ethics Standard Board for Accountants
51. Trustees Network Code of Conduct
52. UK Research Integrity Office Code of Practice for Research 2009 and 2021

About the College

We're the professional body for the police service in England and Wales.

Working together with everyone in policing, we share the skills and knowledge officers and staff need to prevent crime and keep people safe.

We set the standards in policing to build and preserve public trust and we help those in policing develop the expertise needed to meet the demands of today and prepare for the challenges of the future.

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