



College of  
**Policing**

Working together  
to share knowledge

# Review of the Code of Ethics

Scope

July 2021

# 1. Aims

The Code of Ethics was published in 2014 and includes:

- the policing principles, adapted from the Nolan Principles of Public Life
- the Standards of Professional Behaviour (SPB), accompanied by additional explanatory text
- supplementary notes on the National Decision Model (NDM) and breaches of the Code

The College of Policing is undertaking a review of the Code of Ethics, working with a committee of subject matter experts, academics, and frontline officers and staff.

The aim of the review is to:

- review the policing principles to:
  - establish whether they reflect the requirements for both contemporary and future policing<sup>1</sup>
  - ensure that they are inspirational, befitting and relevant to all in policing
  - ensure that they provide a strong and practical ethical framework that supports autonomous professional decision-making and learning and development
  - include 'candour', as per the Hillsborough and Daniel Morgan inquiries
- update the explanatory text of the SPBs to reflect recent legislative changes and other contemporary issues in policing
- provide guidance, recommendations and supporting material to forces, to aid the implementation of ethical decision making at all levels

---

<sup>1</sup> For example, the Hillsborough Review recommendations and findings from other inquiries.

This review will not change the status of the Code of Ethics as a code of practice, nor will it seek to change the overall structure of the Code of Ethics in terms of its components (the principles, the SPBs and the supplementary notes).

The Code of Ethics complements the NDM to support officers and staff who regularly may take decisions that involve ethical or moral considerations. The NDM places the Code at the core of the decision-making process and the review of the Code of Ethics will look at how ethical considerations can inform decision making within the current framework. The review will not look at the NDM.

## Intended audience

The Code of Ethics will continue to be relevant and applicable to all those involved in policing. It is primarily aimed at:

- senior leaders, who need to promote the Code effectively through professional and ethical leadership, to ensure an appropriate working environment within their forces
- everyone working and volunteering in policing, who should promote and adopt the Code in their daily activities to guide their decision making and professional behaviour

## 2. Overall approach

In order to ensure that the review of the Code of Ethics is carried out in a systematic, open and transparent manner, the College's evidence-based guideline development process will be used.

This process will mean that the review is carried out by a committee, made up of practitioners, subject matter experts and academics, with support from the College. Any changes to the Code will be based on the best available evidence. This includes empirical research and practitioner experience that has been systematically collected and synthesised. The process will also involve consultation with stakeholders, practitioners and the public before any amendments to the Code are agreed and released by the College.

This evidence-based approach, supported by the behaviour change model,<sup>2</sup> will:

- maximise the opportunity for a revised Code to help everyone in policing to ‘do the right thing’ in ambiguous and complex situations
- Improve the understanding of the principles that should guide ethical decision making in policing
- help ensure the successful implementation of the revised Code

## Review of the SPBs

In view of its legal content, a review of the SPB will be carried out by the College project team in close consultation with staff associations and the National Police Chiefs’ Council (NPCC), who are leading this part of the work. The committee will not be actively involved in amendments to the SPB. However, they will be asked to review the explanatory text in the Code in light of any changes, and it will be publicly consulted on as part of the final product.

## 3. Context

The Code of Ethics was developed in 2014 and was the first statutory code of practice issued by the College, following its establishment as the first professional body for policing. The development of the Code was considered to be an important step in aligning the College to other professional organisations, most of which have similar codes of ethics. A further impetus was to address concern about particular aspects of policing practice and behaviour that were in the public domain.<sup>3,4,5,6</sup>

In line with concerns that had been raised, the research carried out in developing the 2014 Code focused on:

---

<sup>2</sup> Mitchie S, van Stralen MM and West R. (2011). [The behaviour change wheel: A new method for characterising and designing behaviour change interventions](#). Implementation Science, 6(42).

<sup>3</sup> Anon. (2015). [‘Plebgate’ police officers face misconduct hearings](#) [internet]. BBC News. 10 August. [Accessed March 2021]

<sup>4</sup> Undercover Policing Inquiry. (2015). [Undercover Policing Inquiry](#) [internet]. [Accessed March 2021]

<sup>5</sup> Anon. (2014). [Phone-hacking trial explained](#) [internet]. BBC News. 25 June. [Accessed March 2021]

<sup>6</sup> Independent Police Complaints Commission. (2011). [Corruption in the police service in England and Wales](#). London: TSO.

- how ethical behaviour can be promoted and wrongdoing can be prevented<sup>7</sup>
- what role senior leaders play in encouraging ethical behaviour<sup>8</sup>
- the impact of fairness and respect on ethical policing<sup>9</sup>

Due to these focuses, the Nolan Principles<sup>10</sup> were used as a framework for the Code, with the addition of the principles of 'fairness' and 'respect', which research on organisational justice identified as important drivers for ethical behaviour.

Integrity and procedural justice are reviewed by Her Majesty's Inspectorate of Constabulary and Fire & Rescue Services (HMICFRS) as part of their annual PEEL Legitimacy inspections. They found that consideration of ethics as part of decision-making processes is becoming more widespread, featuring in training and guidance.<sup>11</sup> HMICFRS inspection found that most forces' leaders demonstrated a strong understanding of the value of treating the people who they serve with fairness and respect, by demonstrating ethical behaviours and consistently considering the ethical implications of decisions, policies and practices as a central part of developing and maintaining an ethical culture.<sup>12</sup>

Most forces in England and Wales are working towards creating and maintaining an ethical working environment, through:

- regular communications that reinforce the importance of maintaining high standards of ethical behaviour
- roadshows, short video messages and vlogs incorporating real case studies
- leading by example
- policies and procedures

---

<sup>7</sup> McDowall A and others. (2015). [Promoting ethical behaviour and preventing wrongdoing in organisations – A rapid evidence assessment](#) [internet]. College of Policing. [Accessed March 2021]

<sup>8</sup> Porter L and others. (2015). [The role of leadership in promoting ethical police behaviour: The findings of qualitative case study research](#) [internet]. College of Policing. [Accessed March 2021]

<sup>9</sup> Quinton P and others. (2015). [Fair cop 2: Organisational justice, behaviour and ethical policing An interpretative evidence commentary](#) [internet]. College of Policing. [Accessed March 2021]

<sup>10</sup> Committee on Standards in Public Life. (1995). [Guidance: The Seven Principles of Public Life](#) [internet]. [Accessed June 2021]

<sup>11</sup> HMICFRS. (2017). [PEEL: Police legitimacy 2017 – a national overview](#) [internet]. [Accessed April 2021]

<sup>12</sup> Ibid.

- training courses where staff can discuss ethical dilemmas<sup>13</sup>

This is further supplemented with Force Ethics Committees, which provide a forum for ethical dilemmas faced by staff to be raised and debated.

Forces are trying to foster a 'no blame' culture, where staff are encouraged to learn from mistakes in an open and honest manner.<sup>14,15</sup> The basis of this culture is identifying what went wrong and taking steps to ensure that mistakes are not repeated, as opposed to focusing purely on blame and punishment. Staff can be better supported in the decisions they make, as long as they can demonstrate good decision making, focused on fairness, integrity, and 'doing things right for the right reasons'<sup>16</sup> (decision makers are accountable for the decision they make and the way they are taken).<sup>17</sup>

Research tells us that supervisors not only influence the compliance with codes, but role-modelling by senior figures was considered important in the effective implementation of codes.<sup>18,19,20</sup> Leaders who set values and standards, and communicated and enforced those standards fairly, were also considered key components of promoting ethical police behaviour.<sup>21</sup> An ethical working environment and a belief among workers that a code was well-enforced has been shown to have a positive effect on ethical decision-making.<sup>22</sup> The idea of organisational justice (fair decision-making and respectful treatment internally) and ethical leadership were associated with an increased commitment to the principles of ethical policing.<sup>23</sup>

---

<sup>13</sup> HMICFRS. (2019). [PEEL Assessment 2018/19](#) [internet]. [Accessed March 2021]

<sup>14</sup> See, for example: HMICFRS. (2020). [PEEL: Police effectiveness, efficiency and legitimacy 2018/19: An inspection of West Yorkshire Police](#) [internet]. [Accessed March 2021]

<sup>15</sup> Changes brought about in the Police (Conduct) Regulations 2020 have introduced the Reflective Practice Review Process to promote a reflective and learning culture in policing.

<sup>16</sup> Kingshott B and Prinsloo J. (2004). 'Ethics in policing'. *Phronimon*, 5, pp 49–70.

<sup>17</sup> Nolan JJ, Parsons T and Crispino F. (2020) "'Doing right": Police ethics in an age of reform'. In: Nolan JJ, Crispino F and Parsons T, eds. 'Policing in an age of reform'. London: Palgrave Macmillan.

<sup>18</sup> See, for example: Brown D. (2014). [The impact of codes of ethics on behaviour: A rapid evidence assessment](#) [internet]. College of Policing. [Accessed March 2021].

<sup>19</sup> Thaler J and Helmig B. (2016). 'Do codes of conduct and ethical leadership influence public employees' attitudes and behaviours? An experimental analysis'. *Public Management Review*, 18(9), pp 1365–1399.

<sup>20</sup> Neyroud P. (2019). 'Ethical leadership in policing: Towards a new evidence-based, ethical professionalism?'. In: Ramshaw P, Silvestri M and Simpson M, eds. 'Police leadership'. London: Palgrave Macmillan.

<sup>21</sup> Porter and others (2015).

<sup>22</sup> McDowall and others (2015).

<sup>23</sup> Fridell LA, Mskaly J and Donner CM. (2020). 'The relationship between organisational justice and police officer attitude toward misconduct'. *Policing and Society*, pp 10–26.

Therefore, the extent to which ethical principles become embedded in organisational culture will be important in determining the success of its implementation.<sup>24,25</sup>

HMICFRS identified some initial inconsistencies in the implementation of the Code of Ethics, including in:

- the adoption of all nine policing principles
- the application of the Code across forces
- the use of the Code in everyday decision-making<sup>26,27</sup>

More recently, confusion around the number of different guiding documents (Code of Ethics, individual force values' statements, SPB) was identified as affecting decision making and professional judgements of officers and staff. This was found to be exacerbated in collaborative settings, as officers and staff from different forces working in joint units were subject to different sets of values. This review provides an opportunity to identify how forces might be best supported in, and to make recommendations for, the implementation of the Code.

## Existing work

A number of products were produced during the development of the existing Code:

- a rapid evidence assessment on the impact of codes of ethics on professional conduct<sup>28</sup>
- a rapid evidence assessment on promoting ethical behaviour and preventing wrongdoing in a range of organisations<sup>29</sup>
- qualitative case study research examining the role senior leaders play in encouraging ethical behaviour among frontline officers and staff<sup>30</sup>

---

<sup>24</sup> See, for example: Lawton A. (2004). 'Developing and implementing code of ethics'. *Public Policy and Administration*, 1(7), pp 94–101.

<sup>25</sup> Westmarland L and Rowe M. (2018). 'Police ethics and integrity: can a new code overturn the blue code?'. *Policing and Society*, 28(7), pp 854–870.

<sup>26</sup> HMICFRS. (2015). [PEEL: Police legitimacy 2015 – a national overview](#) [internet]. [Accessed June 2021]

<sup>27</sup> HMICFRS. (2016). [PEEL: Police legitimacy 2016 – a national overview](#) [internet]. [Accessed June 2021]

<sup>28</sup> Brown (2014).

<sup>29</sup> McDowall and others (2015).

<sup>30</sup> Porter and others (2015).

- an exploratory study on what investigators and stakeholders perceived to have contributed to cases of chief officer misconduct<sup>31</sup>
- an interpretative evidence commentary on organisational justice, behaviour and ethical policing<sup>32</sup>
- a literature review conducted as part of the HMICFRS integrity inspection<sup>33</sup>
- a Code of Ethics reading list<sup>34</sup>
- a training package on [Ethics of Professional Policing](#)

## 4. Evidence gathering and process

To support the development process, the College will:

- review the literature on ethical decision making, as well as the factors and conditions associated with effective implementation
- carry out consensus-building activities with a range of officers, staff and volunteers, stakeholders and third parties, to help translate the evidence into a practical and meaningful set of principles
- gather practice evidence on the effective implementation from forces and other organisations

## 5. Impact on other work and products

A range of College activities and products build on principles in the Code of Ethics. All of these will need to be reviewed on completion of the review of the Code. These include but are not limited to:

- the National Decision Model
- the Competency and Values Framework

---

<sup>31</sup> Hales G and others. (2015). [Chief officer misconduct in policing: An exploratory study](#) [internet]. College of Policing. [Accessed March 2021]

<sup>32</sup> Quinton and others. (2015).

<sup>33</sup> Newburn T. (2015). [Literature review - Police integrity and corruption](#) [internet]. HMICFRS. [Accessed March 2021]

<sup>34</sup> College of Policing. (2014). [The Code of Ethics – Reading list](#) [internet]. [Accessed March 2021]



- the Police Education and Qualifications Framework
- the National Curriculum
- various training packages

The review of the Code of Ethics will not specifically identify the changes required in these products, nor is it within this scope to make amendments to these products.

---

## **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.

**[college.police.uk](https://college.police.uk)**