

Inspection, Neutrality and the Quiet Politicisation of Policing: Governance, Legitimacy and Professional Drift in Contemporary England and Wales

Tony Blockley* 

Abstract

Policing in England and Wales is undergoing sustained reform amid an expanding social remit and increasingly intensive inspection. While operational independence remains a constitutional principle, contemporary governance arrangements shape police priorities and practices in ways that are now highly codified and visible. Existing legitimacy research has largely focused on officer–citizen encounters, leaving the institutional mechanisms that shape neutrality and professional judgement underexamined.

This article develops a conceptual analysis integrating police legitimacy theory, regulatory governance, and hybrid professionalism, informed by contemporary inspection frameworks. It advances two linked concepts with direct relevance for police leadership and regulatory practice. First, inspection-as-pedagogy describes how inspection operates as an informal learning system through which forces internalise regulatory priorities, with the potential to shape organisational culture, professional judgement, and operational focus. Second, functional politicisation describes the potential transmission of central political priorities into operational choices through regulatory mechanisms whose political origins and operational consequences are insufficiently explicit or open to democratic scrutiny.

The article does not claim that political influence over policing is new. It examines how published inspection and performance regimes may transmit political priorities into operational practice. Their visibility creates opportunities for democratic scrutiny, although the origins of priorities and their operational consequences may be less transparent than the criteria themselves. While accountability remains essential, inspection-led reform can carry unintended consequences for neutrality and legitimacy. Democratic policing, therefore, requires renewed attention to structural legitimacy alongside procedural fairness. The analysis has implications for police leadership, inspection frameworks, and the design of accountability systems in contemporary policing.

Key words: Police legitimacy; Inspection-as-pedagogy; Regulatory governance; Hybrid professionalism; Operational independence

* Professor of Policing and Head of the School of Social Sciences at Leeds Trinity University. Email: T.blockley@leedstrinity.ac.uk

Introduction

Policing in England and Wales is undergoing sustained reform amid expanding operational responsibilities, heightened public scrutiny, and increasingly intensive regulatory oversight. Forces are now expected to respond to a wide range of complex social harms, including vulnerability, violence against women and girls, mental health crises, and public disorder, while also demonstrating effectiveness through inspection frameworks and performance measures. These demands sit alongside the constitutional principle of operational independence, which positions policing as politically neutral, with Chief Constables responsible for operational decisions and government limited to setting strategic priorities. This tension between formal operational independence and expanding governance control has been identified as a defining paradox of contemporary police governance, with independence increasingly negotiated through internal and external accountability structures rather than exercised autonomously (Malik, 2024).

This arrangement creates a potential tension between impartial policing and the delivery of politically salient objectives. Contemporary policing must remain impartial while serving as a central instrument in delivering politically salient policy objectives. Although this tension is often discussed in relation to frontline encounters or protest policing, far less attention has been paid to how governance arrangements themselves shape institutional neutrality. Most legitimacy research continues to focus on procedural justice in officer–citizen interactions, emphasising fairness, respect, and transparency as foundations of public trust (Jackson et al., 2012; Chan et al., 2025). That work has been influential, but it leaves the organisational conditions that structure how policing is practised and perceived underexamined.

Recent scholarship has begun to address this gap by treating legitimacy as an institutional and dialogic process rather than a purely interactional one. Bottoms and Tankebe (2012) argue that legitimacy emerges through ongoing relationships between institutions and publics, shaped by organisational conduct as much as individual encounters. Hough (2020) similarly situates democratic policing within broader commitments to accountability, restraint, and independence from political influence. These perspectives shift attention upstream, towards the systems that frame professional judgement and define police purpose over time. Governance arrangements also shape public perceptions of police authority. Shannon (2021) shows that the political direction of chief officers carries direct implications for legitimacy, reinforcing the need to examine how institutional structures mediate neutrality beyond frontline encounters.

At the same time, policing has become embedded within increasingly dense regimes of regulatory governance. HM Inspectorate of Constabulary and Fire & Rescue Services (HMICFRS) now play a central role in shaping force priorities through PEEL assessments, thematic inspections, and national improvement frameworks (HMICFRS, 2023b). These mechanisms are formally framed as neutral tools of accountability and improvement. However, broader research in public administration shows that inspection and audit do more than measure performance. They actively influence organisational behaviour by signalling what counts as success, risk, and failure (Power, 1997; Bevan & Hood, 2006). Regulated organisations may adapt accordingly, prioritising demonstrable compliance and defensibility over professional discretion. Recent analyses of police performance management further demonstrate how oversight frameworks have evolved into increasingly influential mechanisms of organisational steering (Perkins & Davies, 2025), strengthening the case for examining inspection not only as evaluation but as a formative governance process.

Against this backdrop, this article argues that contemporary policing reform can produce a form of functional politicisation through regulatory governance, despite the continued formal separation between policing and political control. It develops two connected concepts to explain this process. The first, inspection as pedagogy, captures how inspection operates as an informal learning system, teaching organisations what matters through repetition, narrative framing, and consequence. The second, functional politicisation, describes the potential influence of central political priorities on operational choices through regulatory mechanisms, where the political origins and operational consequences of that influence are insufficiently explicit or contestable.

The claim is not that policing has become party political, nor that officers consciously enact political agendas. Rather, inspection frameworks, legislative discretion in contested policy areas, and performance narratives can combine to transmit political priorities into operational practice (Power, 1997; van Dooren, 2022). Over time, this may reshape professional judgement and organisational culture (Noordegraaf, 2020; de Maillard & Savage, 2022), with important implications for institutional neutrality and legitimacy. Where such shifts occur, they are structural rather than intentional. When policing increasingly reflects externally defined priorities, particularly in politically sensitive domains, public perceptions of impartiality may become harder to sustain, even where frontline conduct remains procedurally fair (Bottoms & Tankebe, 2012; Martin & Bradford, 2021; Jackson et al., 2012).

Two qualifications frame the argument. First, the article does not claim that political influence over policing is new, or that it is greater than in the past. Its argument is that contemporary inspection and performance systems formalise that influence and make it more visible, a point developed in the discussion of continuity and change in police governance below. Second, inspection has brought real benefits. It has exposed organisational failure, strengthened safeguarding, promoted consistency of standards between forces and made the expectations placed on policing more transparent and open to challenge (HMICFRS, 2023a). The concern here is not with scrutiny as such, but with effects of inspection that are less often acknowledged alongside those benefits.

By integrating contemporary legitimacy theory with regulatory governance and scholarship on hybrid professionalism, this article moves beyond interactional accounts of trust to examine how institutional arrangements condition neutrality. It argues that legitimacy cannot be understood solely through officer behaviour but must also be understood through the systems that organise policing, steer professional practice, and define what counts as defensible action. This perspective highlights the limits of inspection-led reform and raises questions about how accountability can be balanced with professional autonomy in democratic policing (Noordegraaf, 2020; Muntingh et al., 2021). The article first defines its key concepts and positions its contribution in relation to existing work on audit, performance management and inspection. It then sets out the historical and governance context, including the role of Police and Crime Commissioners, before developing the two concepts, the mechanisms through which they may operate, and their implications for legitimacy, reform and future research.

Key Concepts and Contribution

Three concepts are central to the analysis. Institutional legitimacy refers to the recognition of policing as rightful authority based not only on how officers treat people in individual encounters, but on judgements about the purposes, priorities and governance of the police organisation as a whole (Bottoms & Tankebe, 2012; Bradford et al., 2021). Hybrid professionalism describes the condition in which professionals retain responsibility for judgement while working within managerial, regulatory and organisational systems that define and assess their performance (Noordegraaf, 2020). Operational independence is the constitutional principle that chief constables direct and control their forces and make operational decisions free from political instruction, while elected and central government actors set strategic priorities and hold chief officers to account (Shannon, 2021; Malik, 2024).

Operational independence is not treated here as an unqualified good. Critics have long argued that the doctrine is poorly defined and can shield police decisions from legitimate democratic scrutiny (Lustgarten, 1986; Roach, 2023; Corley et al., 2025). The concern of this article is narrower: that the boundary between strategic direction and operational decision-making may be shifted by governance mechanisms whose political origins and operational consequences may not be adequately explained or subject to democratic scrutiny.

The two concepts developed in this article build on established bodies of work, and it is important to be clear about what they add. Inspection-as-pedagogy draws on Power's (1997) account of the audit society, on research on performance management and its unintended consequences (Bevan & Hood, 2006; Lu et al., 2021; van Dooren, 2022), and on studies of school inspection. The last of these is especially close. Research on Ofsted and other school inspectorates has shown how inspection shapes what teachers and schools come to value, and how the anticipation of inspection disciplines practice even between visits (Ball, 2003; Perryman, 2006; Ehren et al., 2013; Grek & Lindgren, 2015). Perryman's (2006) notion of panoptic performativity captures much of the same dynamic in education.

Inspection-as-pedagogy is offered as a conceptual extension and synthesis of these literatures. It directs attention to the substantive priorities and values that organisations may learn through inspection, alongside the practices through which they demonstrate compliance. Applied to policing, it connects this learning to institutional legitimacy: what forces learn to prioritise may influence the institution that publics evaluate. Forces also learn from legislation, funding, professional standards and political direction. The distinctive focus here is the contribution of a published, graded and repeated inspection framework, with reputational consequences, to that wider learning environment.

Functional politicisation builds on work on managerialism, new public management and indirect central control of policing (Savage, 2007; Reiner, 2010; Perkins & Davies, 2025). Managerialism describes an approach to organising and measuring performance; functional politicisation identifies a possible political consequence of regulatory steering. Governments and elected local bodies are entitled to set policing priorities and hold forces to account (Lister & Rowe, 2015; Shannon, 2021). In this article, functional politicisation describes a potential process in which priorities originating with central political actors influence operational choices through inspection criteria, performance measures or other regulatory mechanisms, while their political origins and operational consequences are insufficiently explicit or open to

democratic scrutiny. Alignment with national priorities alone does not establish functional politicisation. The concept concerns how those priorities enter operational practice and how that influence is justified and contested.

Inspection priorities may reflect statutory responsibilities, evidence of organisational failure, professional standards or public expectations. Their prominence does not, by itself, indicate politicisation. Equally, operational independence does not exempt policing from democratic accountability. The analytical question is whether regulatory mechanisms carry political priorities into operational choices without adequate explanation, scrutiny or opportunity for challenge.

From Procedural Justice to Institutional Legitimacy

Research on police legitimacy has been shaped primarily by procedural justice theory, which posits that public trust depends on the quality of officer–citizen encounters. Fairness, respectful treatment, transparency, and neutrality are understood as central to perceptions of legitimacy (Jackson et al., 2012). A substantial empirical literature shows that when individuals experience police interactions as procedurally fair, they are more likely to accept police authority and comply with the law (Chan et al., 2025). This work has been influential in redirecting attention away from narrow crime-control outcomes toward the ethical dimensions of policing, establishing legitimacy as a relational and normative process rather than a purely instrumental one.

More recent scholarship has begun to move beyond this interactional focus. Bottoms and Tankebe (2012) conceptualise legitimacy as dialogic, produced through ongoing relationships between institutions and the publics they serve. Martin and Bradford (2021) extend this perspective by foregrounding the role of power and institutional positioning in legitimacy formation, reinforcing the argument that legitimacy cannot be reduced to interactional fairness alone. Hough (2020) similarly situates democratic policing within broader institutional commitments to accountability, restraint, and public service. These perspectives recognise that legitimacy develops over time through organisational conduct and governance practices, rather than being produced solely through isolated encounters.

Despite this shift, much empirical legitimacy research continues to privilege the frontline as the primary site of trust-building. Studies typically centre on stops, searches, arrests, and calls for service, treating organisational context largely as background. While these encounters

clearly matter, this emphasis risks obscuring how structural factors shape perceptions of neutrality. Organisational priorities, leadership signals, resource distribution, and regulatory frameworks all influence how policing is experienced and interpreted by the public, yet these dynamics remain marginal within much of the legitimacy literature. Schaap and Saarikkomäki (2022) similarly argue that procedural justice frameworks often over-privilege encounters while underplaying the organisational and political contexts in which policing operates.

There is growing recognition of this limitation. Chan et al. (2025) argue that public confidence increasingly reflects judgements about systemic fairness, including how forces respond to vulnerability, address misconduct, and engage with wider social concerns. Jackson et al. (2012) similarly note that legitimacy judgements extend beyond individual interactions to encompass broader assessments of police purpose, values, and alignment with community expectations. Together, these developments point towards legitimacy as an institutional property, shaped by governance arrangements and frontline behaviour. A recent meta-analysis further demonstrates that the effects of procedural justice are contingent on social identity and contextual factors, underscoring the importance of institutional environments in shaping legitimacy (Chan et al., 2025).

This reframing is particularly important in contemporary policing, where forces operate within dense regulatory environments and are tasked with delivering outcomes in politically sensitive domains such as public order, safeguarding, and violence prevention (Laufs et al., 2021; Shannon, 2021; HMICFRS, 2023a). In these contexts, neutrality cannot be understood solely as an attribute of officer conduct. It is also produced through how priorities are set, how performance is assessed, and how professional judgement is constrained or enabled by external oversight (Power, 1997; van Dooren, 2022). If legitimacy depends on perceptions of impartiality and ethical coherence, then institutional arrangements that systematically privilege certain policy objectives carry significant implications for democratic policing (Bottoms & Tankebe, 2012; Martin & Bradford, 2021; Jackson et al., 2012).

Building on this contemporary literature, this article argues that neutrality must be conceptualised both structurally and interactionally. Legitimacy is generated not only in encounters between officers and citizens but through organisational learning, regulatory signalling, and the cumulative effects of governance frameworks (Noordegraaf, 2020; de Maillard & Savage, 2022). This perspective opens space to examine how inspection regimes and performance architectures shape professional practice and public trust. By situating

legitimacy within these institutional dynamics, the analysis moves beyond individualised accounts of police behaviour to consider how contemporary systems of accountability may unintentionally reconfigure the moral and political positioning of policing.

Continuity and Change in Police Governance

Political influence over policing in England and Wales has a long history. The Police Act 1964 established the tripartite structure of chief constables, police authorities and the Home Office, but in practice the Home Office exercised considerable influence through funding, circulars, the inspectorate and informal contact with chief officers (Lustgarten, 1986; Reiner, 2010). From the 1990s this influence became more formal. The Police and Magistrates' Courts Act 1994 enabled the Home Secretary to set national objectives, and the 2000s brought national targets, the Police Standards Unit and the Policing Performance Assessment Framework, a period in which central performance management of policing was at its most explicit (Savage, 2007). In 2010 the incoming government removed most central targets, stating that the key objective of the police was to cut crime, and moved local priority-setting to directly elected Police and Crime Commissioners (Home Office, 2010). Since 2014, PEEL inspections have given HMICFRS a central role in assessing force performance, and the 2026 White Paper signals a renewed emphasis on national standards and delivery (Home Office, 2026).

This history cautions against any claim that contemporary policing is simply more politicised than in the past. Informal Home Office pressure on chief officers was often considerable, and the national targets of the 2000s were arguably a more direct form of central steering than current inspection arrangements. What distinguishes the present period is the form that influence takes. Priorities are now codified in published inspection frameworks, graded, compared between forces and reported publicly. This makes influence more visible and, in principle, more open to scrutiny. Researchers and practitioners can see how priorities are communicated and how forces respond to them, and forces and regulators can both be held to account against published standards. The same visibility, however, is what gives inspection its teaching power: what is published, graded and repeated is more likely to be learned. The argument of this article is therefore that contemporary arrangements formalise and systematise political influence, not that they have created it.

Police and Crime Commissioners (PCCs) are central to this picture. Introduced by the Police Reform and Social Responsibility Act 2011, PCCs were intended to provide a direct democratic link between the public and policing: setting local priorities through police and crime plans,

holding chief constables to account, and appointing and, where necessary, removing them (Lister & Rowe, 2015; Shannon, 2021). They represent the formal and openly political channel for shaping police priorities. Their priorities are published, contested at elections and attributable to an elected individual. PCCs therefore provide a more explicitly attributable channel of political priority-setting, although electoral accountability does not remove the possibility of indirect influence over operational decisions. The model has nonetheless been contested, with concerns about low electoral turnout, party politicisation and the relationship between commissioners and chief constables (Lister & Rowe, 2015; Shannon, 2021). In November 2025 the government announced that PCCs would be abolished at the end of the current electoral cycle in 2028, with their functions passing to elected mayors or to new policing and crime boards made up of local council leaders (Home Office, 2025, 2026).

The consequences of replacing the PCC model are directly relevant to this analysis. If local priority-setting is weakened, or absorbed into broader mayoral and council portfolios, at the same time as national standards and inspection gain prominence, the balance between locally contestable political direction and nationally transmitted regulatory priorities may shift further towards the latter. Whether it does so will depend on how the new arrangements operate in practice, but the change makes the question of how priorities reach operational policing more pressing.

Inspection and Regulatory Governance in Contemporary Policing

Regulatory governance is now a central feature of policing in England and Wales. HMICFRS now plays a central role in defining expectations of police performance through the PEEL assessment framework, thematic inspections, and national improvement programmes. These mechanisms are presented as tools of transparency and accountability, intended to assure the public that forces are effective, efficient, and legitimate (HMICFRS, 2023b). Inspection is formally defined as an external evaluative process that measures organisational performance against agreed standards while preserving operational independence.

Public administration research suggests that inspections are rarely neutral. Performance frameworks also carry political logics, reflecting choices about what is valued, measured, and governed (van Dooren, 2022). Audit and regulatory regimes actively shape professional behaviour by signalling priorities, framing risk, and influencing how organisations define success and failure (Power, 1997; Bevan & Hood, 2006). Organisations do not simply respond to inspection outcomes; they may adapt to them. Repeated exposure to performance narratives,

thematic focus areas, and graded judgements can produce learning effects, as leaders and practitioners recalibrate their strategies and practices to align with regulatory expectations.

Bevan and Hood (2006), examining targets in the English health service, show how performance regimes can encourage gaming and the neglect of activity that is not measured. Power (1997) similarly describes how audit processes generate behavioural change, as organisations internalise evaluation criteria and reorganise activity to manage reputational and regulatory risk. Hood (2011) adds that, under sustained scrutiny, public organisations tend to prioritise blame avoidance, favouring defensible procedure over discretionary judgement. Inspection may therefore operate not only as oversight but also as a formative influence on organisational conduct.

Similar dynamics can be seen in policing. HMICFRS assessments consistently foreground themes such as vulnerability, violence against women and girls, public protection, and response policing, reinforced through national action plans and improvement frameworks (HMICFRS, 2023a, b). While these priorities reflect genuine social concerns, their repeated prominence signals what matters most. Forces learn where scrutiny will fall, what evidence will be required, and which domains carry the greatest reputational consequence. Leadership attention, resource deployment, and operational focus are likely to be shaped accordingly, although the relative influence of inspection narratives and local demand requires empirical investigation.

Recent policy developments further reinforce this governance dynamic. The Home Office's (2026) White Paper explicitly links police effectiveness to centrally defined delivery targets across violence reduction, public protection, response times, and neighbourhood visibility. These measures are intended to translate political priorities into operational expectations, embedding national objectives within local performance frameworks. While framed as outcome-focused reform, such targets are likely to strengthen the pedagogical function of inspection by codifying what counts as success and failure in measurable terms. This aligns with broader evidence in public administration that performance regimes rarely operate as neutral tools but actively shape organisational behaviour through goal displacement and strategic adaptation (van Dooren, 2022; Power, 1997; Lu et al., 2021). In policing, performance management may thus extend regulatory steering beyond inspection cycles into everyday operational planning, making governance a primary influence on how professional judgement is formed.

This article conceptualises this process as inspection-as-pedagogy. Inspection operates as an informal learning system through which organisations are taught what constitutes acceptable, commendable, or problematic practice (Power, 1997). Reports, grading structures, and thematic reviews collectively constitute a curriculum for policing priorities, embedding evaluative norms through performance signalling and regulatory narrative (van Dooren, 2022), in a manner comparable to that observed in school inspection (Perryman, 2006; Ehren et al., 2013). Through repetition and consequences, these lessons may be internalised, shaping professional judgement and organisational strategy in response. Inspection becomes pedagogical in effect: it can teach forces how to manage risk, demonstrate legitimacy, and produce defensible practice (de Maillard & Savage, 2022).

This pedagogical influence is not necessarily deliberate, nor does it imply overt political interference. Rather, it reflects the cumulative effects of regulatory governance in complex public services. Inspection frameworks inevitably privilege certain outcomes and ways of working, and can create feedback loops in which organisational behaviour increasingly aligns with external evaluative criteria. As Power (1997) observes, audit cultures operate through subtle behavioural conditioning rather than direct instruction.

In policing, this learning process is reinforced by the expanding scope of operational responsibility. Forces are expected to address a growing range of social harms, from safeguarding vulnerable adults to managing protest and public disorder. Legislative frameworks in these areas often grant broad discretion to officers, while inspection regimes provide the interpretive context within which that discretion is exercised. Professional judgement may therefore be influenced by both legal authority and regulatory signalling.

Inspection as pedagogy does not eliminate professional expertise, but it may reshape it. This tension between performance management and professional discretion has also been observed within investigative policing, where organisational metrics increasingly structure how autonomy is exercised (de Maillard & Savage, 2022). Leaders and practitioners continue to exercise discretion, increasingly within parameters defined by performance governance. Over time, this may encourage organisational drift towards demonstrable compliance and defensible practice, often at the expense of locally grounded professional reasoning. What may emerge is a hybrid model of policing in which autonomy is mediated by expectations of inspection and neutrality is refracted through regulatory priorities.

Understanding inspection in this way is central to the analysis of contemporary police legitimacy. If legitimacy is partly produced through institutional arrangements, then inspection may play a constitutive role in shaping how policing is organised and experienced. By transmitting central priorities into operational practice, inspection may contribute to behavioural alignment with politically salient agendas, even in the absence of direct political control. This provides the basis for the concept of functional politicisation developed in the next section.

Professional Drift and Hybrid Policing

The influence of inspection and performance governance must be understood alongside wider changes in professional practice. Like many public services, policing has moved towards hybrid forms of professionalism in which occupational discretion coexists with managerial accountability and regulatory oversight (Noordegraaf, 2020). Contemporary policing no longer operates primarily through internally defined professional norms. Instead, it is embedded within dense systems of performance measurement, inspection, and policy delivery that shape how judgment is exercised and evaluated.

Professional autonomy need not diminish whenever organisational relationships become more extensive. Noordegraaf's (2020) account of connective professionalism directs attention to how professionals can sustain autonomy and authority through relationships with others. For this analysis, regulatory relationships may enable professional learning as well as constrain judgement; their effects should not be assumed in advance. Research on post-NPM police reforms and changes in UK police professionalism also points to the importance of organisational context in understanding professional practice (Rolandsson, 2022; Martin, 2022).

These shifts may alter the conditions in which discretion is exercised. While operational independence remains constitutionally intact, the practical space for professional judgement is increasingly structured by regulatory expectations. Terpstra and Fyfe (2019), assessing the creation of national police organisations in Scotland and the Netherlands, raise concerns about the effects of centralising reform on locally grounded policing. Digital and performance infrastructures may further accelerate this shift from discretion to standardisation (Gundhus et al., 2022). Over time, practitioners may learn to align decision-making with what is most likely to be scrutinised, evidenced, and defended. Professional priorities may be recalibrated accordingly.

Functional politicisation, as defined earlier, would require more than adaptation to external standards: political priorities would need to influence operational choices through regulatory mechanisms whose political origins and consequences are insufficiently explicit or contestable. The mechanisms proposed below identify ways in which that process might occur, rather than demonstrate that it has occurred.

Forces may respond to inspection themes and regulatory benchmarks by adapting strategy, reallocating resources and revising professional practice (van Dooren, 2022; de Maillard & Savage, 2022). Such adaptation is consistent with organisational learning and does not alone demonstrate politicisation. Establishing the latter would require tracing the origins of priorities, their translation into operational choices and the opportunities available to scrutinise that translation.

This dynamic is likely to be most visible where policing intersects with politically salient social issues, including vulnerability, safeguarding, protest, and violence prevention (Shannon, 2021; Laufs et al., 2021). In these domains, the interaction between broad legal discretion and regulatory signalling described above is most consequential. What results is not overt political control, but organisational adaptation that may increasingly reflect priorities embedded in external accountability systems.

This proposed process does not require bad faith. Police leaders reconcile demands from communities, inspectors and central government under resource constraints. Alignment with inspection frameworks may be a rational response to reputational and accountability pressures (Power, 1997; Hood, 2011; van Dooren, 2022). Whether it displaces professional judgement or supports better practice depends on how those frameworks are interpreted and applied.

The potential tension concerns whether regulatory expectations support impartial practice or carry inadequately scrutinised political priorities into operational decisions. Political salience alone cannot determine which interpretation is warranted.

The next section proposes organisational mechanisms through which regulatory priorities may influence practice. Their existence and political consequences require separate empirical assessment.

Mechanisms of Structural Drift

The processes described above operate through concrete organisational mechanisms. Functional politicisation is not an abstract condition; it is likely to operate through routine

governance practices that translate regulatory priorities into everyday policing. These mechanisms can work cumulatively, shaping how forces assess risk, allocate resources, and exercise professional judgement. Drawing on inspection frameworks and demand literature, three interrelated pathways are proposed: thematic steering, performance signalling, and defensibility logic.

Thematic steering occurs through the repeated prioritisation of specific issues within inspection regimes. HMICFRS assessments consistently foreground areas such as vulnerability, violence against women and girls, public protection, and response policing, reinforced through thematic reviews and national improvement programmes (HMICFRS, 2023a). While these priorities reflect legitimate social concerns, their sustained prominence signals where attention should be focused. Leadership teams are likely to anticipate scrutiny and adjust strategy, workforce deployment, and internal assurance accordingly. Over time, inspection themes may become embedded in planning cycles and operational priorities.

This steering effect may be strengthened by the narrative framing of inspection outcomes. Reports identify “causes of concern”, “areas for improvement”, and “promising practice”, creating implicit hierarchies of organisational importance. Forces may learn not only what requires attention, but what must be prioritised to demonstrate progress. As Power (1997) notes, such evaluative narratives act as behavioural cues, shaping institutional responses through reputational incentives rather than formal direction.

Performance signalling operates through grading structures, benchmarks, and evidence requirements. PEEL assessments increasingly depend on documented processes, auditable pathways, and visible compliance. This can encourage forces to build systems capable of producing assurance, often privileging activities that can be easily evidenced over practices grounded in relational work or local responsiveness. Research on performance regimes in health and policing shows how such environments can reward standardisation and documentation, gradually redirecting professional effort towards what is measurable and defensible (Bevan & Hood, 2006; de Maillard & Savage, 2022).

Reliance on centrally defined performance targets is likely to intensify this signalling effect. When national priorities are operationalised through quantitative benchmarks, forces are incentivised to organise activity around what is visible, auditable, and reportable. Comparative research on performance governance suggests that such systems can encourage convergence towards metric-driven practice, often narrowing professional discretion and reinforcing

compliance-oriented behaviour (Gundhus et al., 2022; van Dooren, 2022; Gofen & Gassner, 2022). In policing, this may strengthen defensibility logics by privileging standardised outputs over contextual judgment, and accelerate alignment between inspection priorities and frontline practice.

This may have practical consequences for policing. Leadership attention tends to gravitate toward domains associated with inspection outcomes, while frontline practice may be shaped by expectations of evidentiary compliance. Officers and supervisors are likely to learn which activities attract organisational recognition and which remain largely invisible within performance frameworks. Discretion is not removed; it is exercised within an environment in which demonstrable alignment with national standards carries institutional value.

Defensibility logic emerges as forces respond to sustained scrutiny under conditions of high demand and limited resources. Laufs et al. (2021) document the growing complexity of police demand, particularly in relation to vulnerability, mental health, and safeguarding. In this context, inspection frameworks provide a reference point for what counts as defensible decision-making. Organisational cultures may increasingly emphasise documentation, procedural alignment, and risk management as mechanisms for protecting against external criticism. Hood (2011) describes how public organisations under sustained scrutiny develop blame-avoidance strategies, prioritising procedures and decisions that can be justified after the event.

This logic of defensibility may reshape professional judgement, particularly in politically sensitive domains such as protest, safeguarding, and public protection. Decisions are made not only in response to immediate circumstances, but with awareness of how actions may later be scrutinised, encouraging anticipatory compliance and defensible practice (Power, 1997; Hood, 2011). Over time, operational practice may converge with inspection priorities.

Together, these mechanisms propose how regulatory expectations may influence attention, evidence production and discretionary judgement (Power, 1997; van Dooren, 2022). Their effects could support improvement, encourage compliance or combine both. Whether they constitute functional politicisation depends on the political origins of the priorities transmitted and the scrutiny of their operational consequences.

The proposed drift could arise through organisational adaptation without explicit political instruction. Individual intent would not, by itself, establish or rule out the process.

The implications for institutional legitimacy would depend on how these changes affect policing and how publics interpret them. A shift towards auditable compliance need not undermine legitimacy, but it warrants examination where it displaces locally responsive practice or obscures responsibility for operational choices (Bottoms & Tankebe, 2012; Martin & Bradford, 2021).

Implications for Legitimacy and Democratic Policing

The governance dynamics described above have potential consequences for police legitimacy. Contemporary legitimacy theory recognises that public trust is shaped not only by individual encounters with officers but by wider judgements about institutional fairness, neutrality, and ethical coherence (Jackson et al., 2012; Chan et al., 2025). When policing is experienced as impartial and oriented towards the public good, authority is more likely to be accepted as rightful. When policing appears aligned with policy agendas or political narratives, legitimacy becomes uneven and contested.

The proposed process of functional politicisation could complicate this relationship. As inspection-led priorities become embedded in organisational routines, policing may increasingly reflect externally defined concerns, particularly in politically sensitive domains such as protest, safeguarding, and vulnerability. Although these priorities often arise from genuine social need, a concern would arise where their transmission into operational choices bypasses adequate explanation and scrutiny. For some communities, this may weaken perceptions of neutrality, even where frontline practice remains professional and procedurally fair.

Legitimacy is cumulative and dialogic, shaped over time through relationships between institutions and the publics they serve (Bottoms & Tankebe, 2012; Martin & Bradford, 2021; Chan et al., 2025). Structural alignment with central priorities may therefore carry lasting consequences for trust, especially where policing intersects with contested social values. Hough (2020) argues that democratic policing depends on visible restraint, accountability, and independence from political influence. When governance frameworks blur these boundaries, the moral authority of policing becomes harder to sustain.

These dynamics also affect practitioners. Hybrid professionalism and defensibility cultures can generate role tension, as officers are required to balance community responsiveness with compliance-driven expectations. As performance governance intensifies, practitioners operate

under sustained accountability pressure, navigating competing demands from inspection regimes, central priorities, and local communities. This environment may encourage risk-averse decision-making and prioritise auditable outcomes, narrowing the space for relational and preventive practice (Noordegraaf, 2020; Hood, 2011). Debbaut and De Kimpe (2023) similarly highlight how organisational conditions shape officer self-legitimacy, influencing how authority is exercised and justified internally.

From a legitimacy perspective, this matters. Public confidence is consistently associated with perceptions of fairness, empathy, and local responsiveness (Jackson et al., 2012). Yet these qualities are more difficult to sustain within systems that privilege documentation and standardisation over professional discretion. As organisational attention gravitates towards inspection metrics, forms of policing that are less visible to regulators but central to community trust risk being marginalised.

National objectives and local accountability may support one another or compete for organisational attention. The relevant question is whose priorities gain authority and what opportunities remain to challenge them. Rocha Beardall's (2022) analysis of citizen oversight raises related questions about the exclusion of alternative accountability voices, although its applicability to inspection in England and Wales requires examination.

This analysis does not suggest that inspection or accountability undermine legitimacy in themselves. As noted earlier, external scrutiny has brought real benefits. The concern is that when inspection functions pedagogically and professional autonomy is progressively mediated by performance frameworks, legitimacy risks being reframed in regulatory terms. Regulatory assurance may become an incomplete substitute for evidence about ethical judgement and community relationships.

The visibility of contemporary inspection also cuts the other way. Because frameworks, criteria and reports are published, the priorities that inspection carries can be examined, debated and challenged in ways that informal pressure from government could not. Published arrangements provide a basis for holding both forces and regulators to account, and for asking whose priorities inspection reflects. The same features that give inspection its pedagogical force therefore also make it contestable. Published frameworks make regulatory expectations visible, but publication alone does not establish how priorities were selected or how they influence operational decisions. The relevant distinction is between the visibility of inspection requirements and the transparency of the political choices and organisational adaptations

associated with them. Whether publication enables meaningful scrutiny of those processes is an empirical question.

Understanding legitimacy in this institutional sense exposes the limits of reform strategies that concentrate primarily on officer behaviour or procedural justice. While these remain important, they are insufficient if governance structures continue to steer policing towards policy delivery at the expense of neutrality. Democratic policing requires not only fair encounters, but organisational arrangements that protect professional judgement and sustain a visible separation between policing and political agendas (Muntingh et al., 2021).

Rethinking Reform and Accountability

The proposed mechanisms suggest that accountability design should consider both the benefits of regulatory learning and the risks of insufficiently scrutinised operational influence.

Inspection-as-pedagogy draws attention to the values communicated through evaluation and performance signalling (Power, 1997; van Dooren, 2022). Acknowledging this formative role need not imply political partiality by inspectors. It invites explicit consideration of how priorities are selected, justified and revised.

Operational independence may be mediated through governance relationships without being extinguished (Malik, 2024). The practical issue is whether operational choices remain attributable, explainable and open to appropriate challenge, including where regulatory expectations influence them.

Research on school inspection and performance management identifies potential pressures towards performative compliance and standardisation (Ball, 2003; Perryman, 2006; Bevan & Hood, 2006). These findings inform the proposed mechanisms, but sectoral differences mean that their effects on policing cannot be assumed.

Institutional neutrality requires impartial exercise of lawful authority, rather than insulation from every policy objective. The concern is therefore how political priorities enter operational practice and whether accountability arrangements make that influence open to scrutiny (Muntingh et al., 2021).

At the same time, it is important not to romanticise professional autonomy or understate the value of external scrutiny. The question is not whether policing should be accountable, but how accountability operates. A more reflexive approach to inspection would acknowledge its

pedagogical effects and seek to balance assurance with the protection of professional judgement.

This points to the need for greater transparency in how inspection priorities are established and revised. If inspection functions as a curriculum of policing, decisions about thematic focus carry substantial normative weight. Involving practitioners, communities, and democratic institutions in shaping these priorities may help mitigate perceptions of politicisation and strengthen legitimacy. Inspection frameworks that recognise relational practice, ethical reasoning, and community engagement alongside procedural compliance could support a more balanced model of professionalism.

Finally, the analysis highlights the importance of institutional self-awareness. Police organisations actively interpret regulatory signals; they are not passive recipients of governance. Building critical capacity within forces to reflect on how inspection shapes practice may help leaders navigate accountability pressures without sacrificing neutrality. This aligns with broader calls in public administration for learning-oriented governance that supports professional judgement rather than constrains it and responds to concerns that dominant legitimacy regimes can suppress alternative forms of accountability (Rocha Beardall, 2022).

Limitations and Directions for Research

This article offers a conceptual analysis grounded in the governance context of policing in England and Wales. This article does not empirically test the proposed relationship between inspection priorities, organisational adaptation, operational decisions and public perceptions of neutrality. Existing research informs parts of this argument, but the analysis does not establish the complete causal sequence or separate inspection effects from those of legislation, funding, leadership and local demand. Several lines of research could address these gaps. First, documentary analysis could track whether force strategies, control strategies and resourcing decisions change following thematic inspections or PEEL areas for improvement, and whether such changes reflect local demand or inspection priorities. Second, interviews with chief officers, force inspection liaison leads and frontline supervisors could examine how inspection expectations are interpreted and anticipated in everyday decision-making, and whether practitioners experience inspection as learning, constraint or both. Third, comparative and longitudinal studies could investigate variation in organisational responses while accounting for legislation, funding, leadership and local demand. Different inspection outcomes alone

would not establish the causal effects of inspection. Fourth, public attitude surveys could test whether perceptions of police neutrality differ between policy domains that are prominent in inspection and those that are not. Finally, the replacement of Police and Crime Commissioners from 2028 offers an opportunity to study how changes in local democratic governance alter the balance between local and national influences on policing priorities, including comparison between areas that adopt different replacement arrangements. Work of this kind would allow the concepts developed here to be refined, qualified or rejected.

Conclusion

This article offers inspection-as-pedagogy as a conceptual extension of audit, performance management and organisational learning research. It focuses on the substantive priorities forces may learn through published, graded and repeated evaluation, and the potential implications for institutional legitimacy.

Functional politicisation identifies a possible consequence of that process where central political priorities influence operational choices through regulatory mechanisms whose political origins and operational consequences are insufficiently explicit or contestable. Neither regulatory learning nor alignment with national priorities alone establishes politicisation. Political influence over policing is longstanding; the contribution concerns its possible mechanisms and visibility within contemporary governance.

The analysis proposes relationships for investigation rather than demonstrating inspection-led changes in operational practice or public legitimacy. Whether inspection constrains discretion, supports professional standards or does both remains a question for empirical research.

Inspection can expose failure, support learning and strengthen accountability. Its formative effects should therefore be assessed alongside these benefits. Democratic policing requires governance arrangements that support impartial professional judgement and legitimate democratic scrutiny (Muntingh et al., 2021).

The reforms discussed in this article provide opportunities to investigate changes in the relationship between local accountability and national performance expectations. Their consequences for operational discretion and neutrality should not be presumed.

The analysis has three practical implications. For police leaders, it suggests assessing inspection-driven changes alongside statutory duties, professional standards, local demand and community priorities, and explaining the reasoning behind operational adaptations. For

inspectors, it suggests making the reasoning behind thematic priorities explicit and open to consultation, assessing relational practice, ethical reasoning and community engagement alongside procedural compliance, and monitoring the unintended effects of their own frameworks. For policy makers, it suggests that reforms to police governance, including the arrangements that replace Police and Crime Commissioners, should maintain a clear and visible distinction between setting strategic priorities and directing operational practice, and should ensure that local democratic voices keep a real role in setting the priorities against which policing is measured.

The practical aim is to make the selection of priorities and their translation into policing sufficiently transparent to be examined, justified and challenged.

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