National Decision-Making Model & Constructed Development Theory

In this article, EMPAC Senior Research Fellow, Dave Hill, explores the UK's Police National Decision-Making Model through the lens of Constructed Development Theory. The National Decision Model (NDM) is the principal framework for police decision making in England and Wales. It is intended to provide a structured, defensible and ethically grounded method for making decisions in operational and non-operational contexts.

The NDM places the Code of Ethics at its centre and organises decision making around six linked elements: code of ethics, information, assessment, powers and policy, options, and action and review. In official guidance, the NDM is presented as applicable to everything from spontaneous incidents to planned operations, and as suitable for both frontline officers and those working in supervisory, investigative or strategic roles (College of Policing, 2024a). This breadth is one of its strengths, but it is also a source of tension.

A framework designed to fit all policing contexts risks becoming too abstract to guide the fine-grained cognitive processes that shape decisions in the moment. Official guidance emphasises flexibility and accountability, while the Code of Ethics reinforces the expectation that all police reasoning should be morally defensible (College of Policing, 2024a; College of Policing, 2024b).

The lens of CDT

This article critically analyses the NDM through the lens of Constructed Development Theory (CDT) developed by Dr Darren Stevens. Although CDT is not part of mainstream policing doctrine, it offers a useful perspective because it focuses on how people construct awareness, choice and response in real time. Stevens argues that behaviour is not simply a product of formal procedure or rational sequencing; rather, it emerges from the interaction between intention, awareness, cognitive shortcuts and situational interpretation (Stevens, 2023).

This makes CDT especially relevant to policing, where officers often make decisions under pressure, uncertainty and emotional intensity. Used as an analytical lens, CDT helps reveal both what the NDM does well and where it may be conceptually thin. The key argument advanced here is that the NDM is valuable as an ethical and organisational scaffold, but it under-specifies the developmental and cognitive capacities required to use that scaffold well.

The National Decision Model: Purpose and Structure

The NDM was adopted to provide a consistent national framework for police decision making and to improve the defensibility of police actions when reviewed after the event. Official guidance states that the model can be used not only to make decisions but also to explain and review them. The six elements are often remembered through the CIAPOAR mnemonic: Code of Ethics, Information, Assessment, Powers and policy, Options, Action and review.

Importantly, the model is not intended as a rigid linear sequence. Officers are expected to move back and forth between stages as new information emerges. In rapidly evolving incidents, the model may be cycled through in seconds; in more deliberate contexts, such as investigations or public order planning, it may unfold over a longer period. The NDM therefore presents itself as dynamic rather than mechanistic (College of Policing, 2024a).

What and how

At a normative level, the NDM has notable merits. First, it embeds ethics into operational judgement rather than treating morality as an external afterthought. Second, it offers a shared professional language that can support supervision, debriefing and accountability. Third, it encourages officers to consider alternatives and contingencies instead of defaulting automatically to habitual or coercive action. In an occupation where decisions are frequently scrutinised by courts, misconduct panels, inquiries and the public, a model that helps officers articulate why they acted as they did is institutionally valuable.

Yet these strengths should not obscure an important weakness: the NDM largely describes what officers should consider, but it is less precise about how they become capable of considering these things wisely under pressure. Recent critical scholarship argues that, despite more than a decade of use, there remains limited empirical evidence for the NDM's real-world effectiveness across the full range of policing tasks (Boulton, 2025).

Constructed Development Theory

Constructed Development Theory is associated with the work of Dr Darren Stevens, who presents development not as a static stage label but as an in-the-moment process through which people construct intention, awareness, choice and response (Stevens, 2023). CDT suggests that human action is shaped by recurrent cognitive shortcuts, described by Stevens as 'cognitive intentions', which influence how people frame situations and what they notice, ignore, prefer or avoid. Development, on this view, is less about possessing knowledge in the abstract and more about being aware of how one's thinking is being constructed as events unfold. The more aware a person becomes of their own meaning-making processes, the more choice they have in how they respond.

This focus on awareness-in-action makes CDT particularly applicable to professions where high -stakes decisions are made quickly and in ambiguous environments. Applied to policing, CDT directs attention to an issue often neglected by formal decision models: two officers may be trained in the same procedure yet interpret the same encounter very differently because their awareness is organised differently in the moment. One may react defensively, filter out disconfirming information and narrow prematurely to a preferred option. Another may hold multiple interpretations in mind, notice their own bias, and respond with greater proportionality.

CDT therefore adds a developmental and metacognitive dimension to the evaluation of police judgement. It not only asks whether a framework exists, but whether the officer has the awareness capacity to use it intelligently rather than ritualistically. This is a particularly potent critique in policing, where institutional models can be taught as checklists while the actual determinants of behaviour may be emotional regulation, tacit assumptions and situational framing (Stevens, 2023).

The strengths of the NDM when looked at through a CDT lens

From a CDT perspective, one of the NDM's strongest features is that it does not reduce police judgement to pure rule-following. Its cyclical design implies that decision making is iterative and responsive rather than fixed. That is broadly compatible with the CDT view that awareness and response are continuously constructed in relation to unfolding circumstances. The NDM also gives explicit prominence to review, which can support reflective learning after the event.

If taught and used properly, this can help officers become more aware of the assumptions and patterns that shaped their decisions, rather than simply judging outcomes in hindsight. In developmental terms, this is important because growth depends on examining how one's thinking was organised, not merely whether the result was good or bad. This can them become the shift from reflective to reflexive thinking.

The right thing to do

A second strength is the central position given to ethics. CDT emphasises intentionality: how people orient themselves toward action matters. The NDM's ethical core can therefore be read as an attempt to shape the officer's intention before and during action. Rather than asking only 'What can I do?', the model invites the decision maker to ask, 'What is the right thing to do, and why?' This matters for legitimacy because public confidence in policing depends not only on outcomes but on whether authority appears principled, fair and proportionate.

The Code of Ethics reinforces values such as courage, respect and empathy, and public service, all of which can act as counterweights to narrow instrumental reasoning (College of Policing, 2024b). Through a CDT lens, these ethical principles may function as developmental prompts that widen awareness beyond immediate control or enforcement objectives.

A third merit is that the NDM provides a common language for articulating judgement. Police work often involves tacit expertise that is difficult to explain, especially under external scrutiny. By naming key domains for consideration, the model helps convert implicit reasoning into accountable narrative. This can support supervision and organisational learning, particularly for novice officers who may benefit from an explicit scaffold while their judgement is still developing. CDT does not reject scaffolds; rather, it suggests that scaffolds are most effective when they help people notice and reorganise their thinking. In that sense, the NDM has developmental potential, especially in training and debrief settings where officers can revisit how they assessed risk, interpreted policy and selected options.

CDT analysis of the weaknesses of the NDM

The most significant CDT-based criticism of the NDM is that it assumes a level of reflective capacity that may not actually be present in the user. The model instructs officers to gather information, assess threat, consider powers, identify options and review outcomes. Yet each of these acts depends on prior acts of perception and interpretation. Officers do not encounter information neutrally; they construct salience through attention, experience, expectation and emotion.

CDT would therefore argue that the true issue is not whether the steps exist, but how the officer's awareness filters each step. An officer experiencing fear, fatigue, frustration or confirmation bias may move through the NDM while remaining trapped in a constricted interpretive frame. In that case, formal adherence may coexist with poor judgement.

This reveals a second weakness: the NDM can lend itself to retrospective rationalisation. Because it offers a structure for justifying decisions after the fact, there is a risk that it becomes a narrative tool for defending action rather than a genuine aid to thinking beforehand. CDT is alert to this problem because it distinguishes between post hoc explanation and in-the-moment awareness. An officer may be able to describe the NDM stages convincingly in a statement or misconduct interview without having engaged in meaningful reflective reasoning during the incident itself.

Tick box exercise?

The model's accountability function is valuable, but unless linked to deeper developmental practice it can become performative. Recent critical literature supports this concern, warning that the NDM may devolve into a tick-box exercise and that its evidential basis remains limited (Boulton, 2025).

Third, the NDM arguably underplays the developmental differences between novice and expert decision makers. A constable in early service may need a clear structure to avoid impulsive or unlawful action, whereas an experienced officer may operate with intuitive pattern recognition developed through repeated exposure. CDT would suggest that these are not merely differences in experience but differences in the complexity and flexibility of awareness. If so, then one universal model may not function equally well across levels of development.

Ethically informed judgement

For some users it may provide necessary discipline; for others it may be too generic to capture sophisticated reasoning. More importantly, the model does not itself explain how officers progress from dependence on explicit steps to more fluid, ethically informed judgement. It standardises decision language without adequately theorising developmental growth.

A further limitation concerns organisational culture. The NDM is often presented as if better decisions follow from better individual reasoning. CDT suggests this is incomplete, because awareness is socially and institutionally shaped. What officers notice as 'risk', whose account they treat as credible, and which options feel practically available are all influenced by team norms, supervision, workload, past organisational scandals and broader police culture.

Ethics matters

In this respect the NDM may be overly individualistic. It locates decision quality in the officer's use of a model, whereas CDT invites attention to the wider conditions that shape how awareness is constructed. This is especially relevant in high-profile contexts such as stop and search, protest policing or vulnerability related callouts, where institutional assumptions about threat, disorder or credibility may silently guide the decision process.

Finally, the NDM's ethical centre, while normatively attractive, may be insufficiently operationalised. Simply placing the Code of Ethics at the centre of a diagram does not ensure that ethical reflection meaningfully shapes conduct. CDT would argue that ethics must be mediated through awareness: officers need to notice when defensive intentions, status concerns or emotional reactivity are displacing principled judgement.

Without that level of reflexivity, ethical language may remain aspirational rather than transformative. The College of Policing presents the Code of Ethics as guidance to help everyone in policing do the right thing in the right way for the right reasons, but CDT highlights that the capacity to act for the right reasons depends on developmental work, not merely ethical instruction (College of Policing, 2024b; Stevens, 2023).

Conclusion

In conclusion, the UK Police National Decision Model remains an important professional framework because it embeds ethics, supports accountability and provides a common structure for articulating judgement. Through the lens of Constructed Development Theory, however, its limitations become clearer. The NDM tells officers what domains to consider, but it says comparatively little about how awareness is formed, narrowed or expanded in the moment of decision. CDT exposes the gap between procedural structure and developmental capability. It suggests that sound police judgement depends not only on having a model, but on cultivating the metacognitive and ethical awareness required to use that model intelligently under pressure.

The NDM should therefore be understood not as a complete solution to police decision making, but as a scaffold whose effectiveness depends on deeper developmental work. For police education and leadership, the implication is that training should move beyond memorising CIAPOAR and focus more explicitly on self-awareness, bias recognition, emotional regulation, reflexive debriefing and the organisational conditions that shape perception. Only then can the NDM function as more than a defensibility tool and become a genuinely transformative framework for ethical policing.

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