

## Police officers aren't getting younger every year, and there's a debate to be had about the implications.

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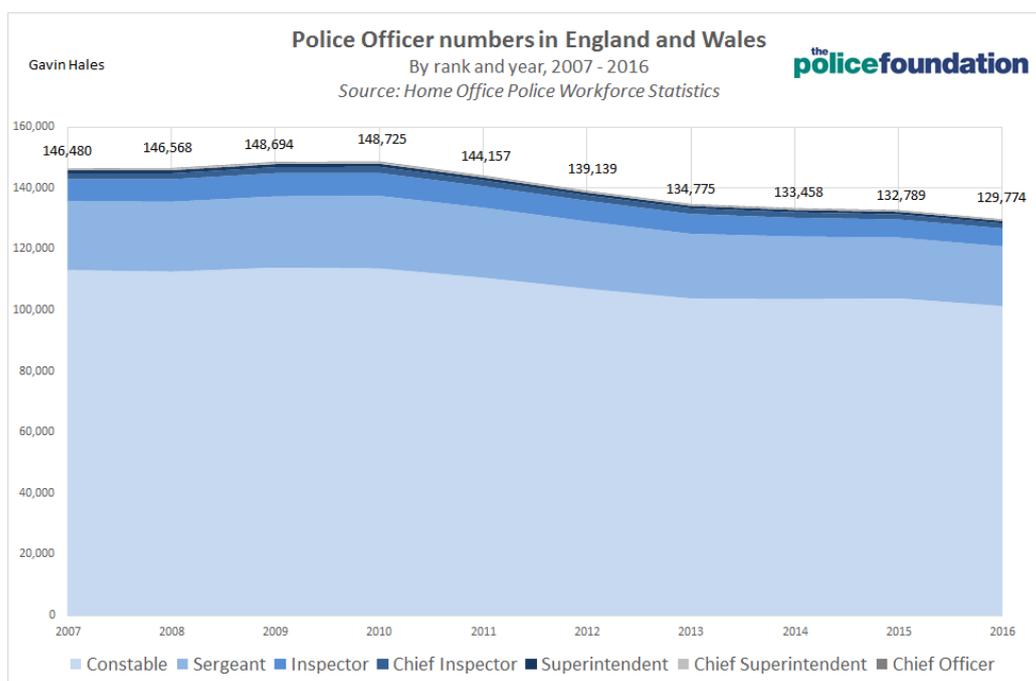
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The Home Office recently published the latest *Police Workforce Statistics for England and Wales* (covering the 43 territorial forces and British Transport Police), including a number of data tables on leavers, joiners, long-term sickness, misconduct proceedings and the age and ethnicity of the police workforce.<sup>1</sup> The data cover 10 full years from 2007 to 2016 and I want to examine an important finding that emerges from them, on the way the police officer workforce is ageing.

### Police officer numbers

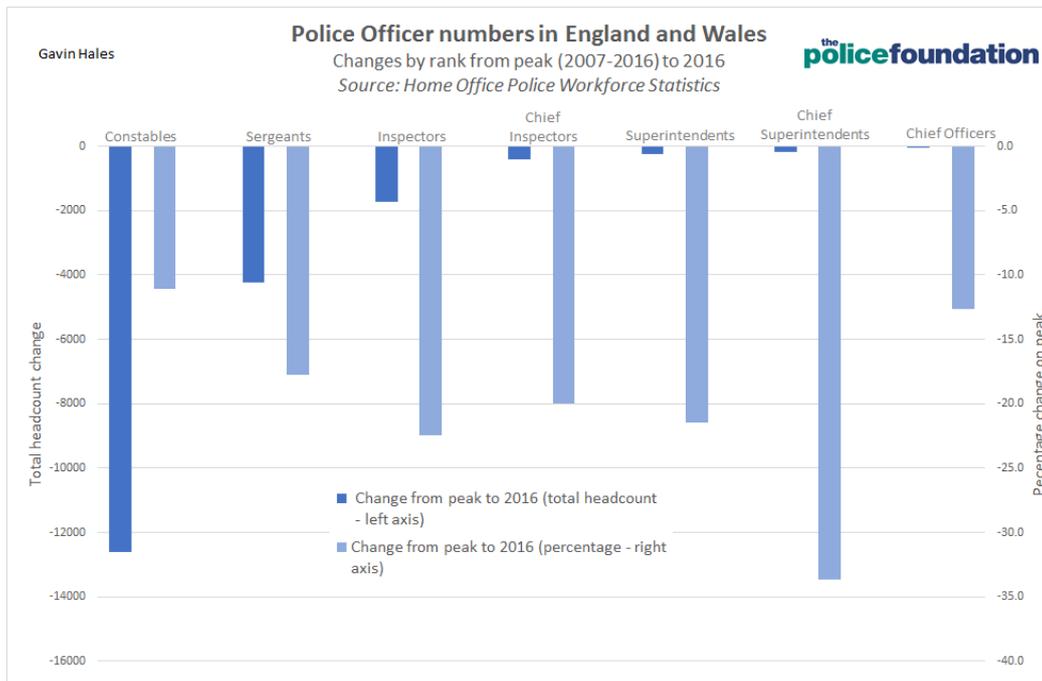
First, however, let's look at what is happening to police officer numbers and the rank composition of the workforce.



It's hardly a secret that officer numbers have been falling. We can see that in the period covered by the data, overall police officer numbers peaked in 2010 at 148,725 and by 31 March 2016 had fallen by 18,951 (12.4 per cent) to 129,774.

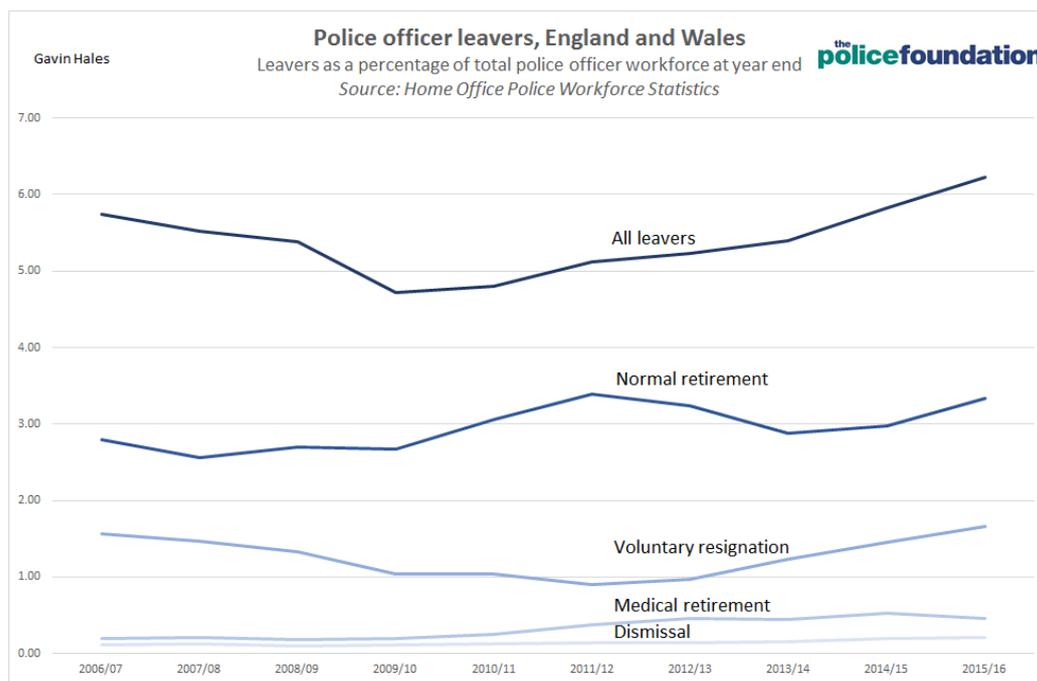
The changes by rank from their respective peaks during the period 2007-2016 are shown below, in both headcount totals and percentage change (the peak year varies by rank). We can see that the largest falls in headcount terms have unsurprisingly been among Constables, while the greatest percentage fall has been at the rank of Chief Superintendent.

<sup>1</sup> <https://www.gov.uk/government/statistics/police-workforce-open-data-tables>



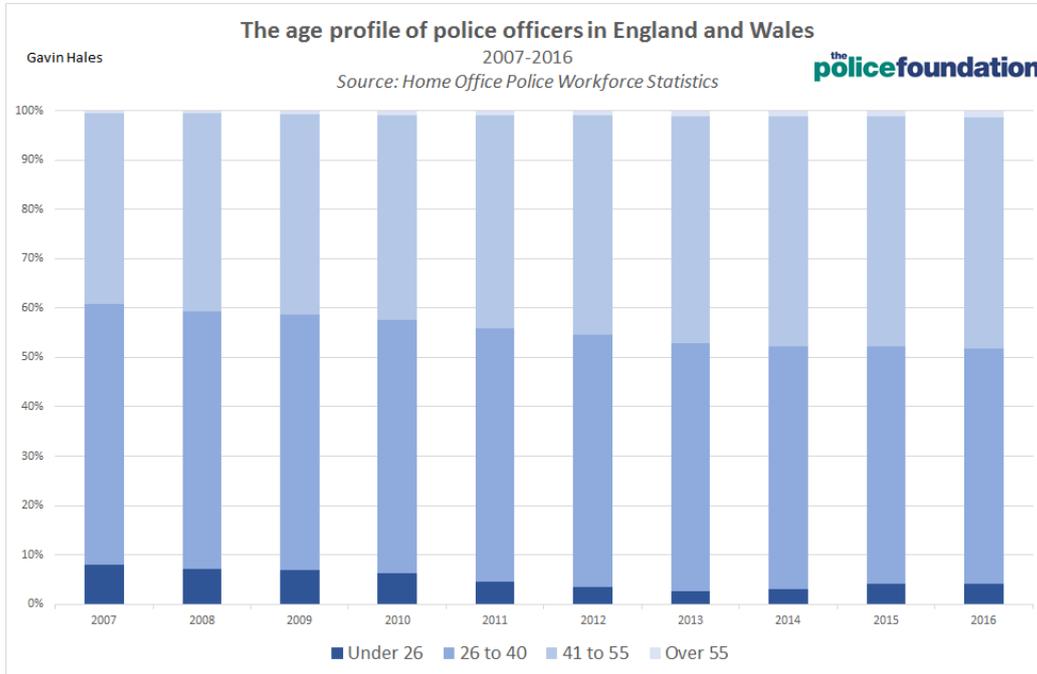
## Leavers

The Home Office data also allow us to see that the proportion of the police officer workforce leaving each year has increased since 2009/10 and that the bulk of those officers leaving the police service did so by way of 'normal retirement' (which peaked in 2015/16 at 6.2 per cent of the workforce). This implies that they reached retirement age (which for currently serving officers reaching 30 years' service may be around the late-40s to mid-50s, although pension changes mean in future many will work much longer). We can also see that voluntary resignations have increased since 2011/12, as have medical retirements (though in smaller numbers, and with the rise starting earlier and falling slightly in the most recent year). Dismissals have doubled since 2008/09 from 0.1 to 0.2 per cent of the workforce per year.

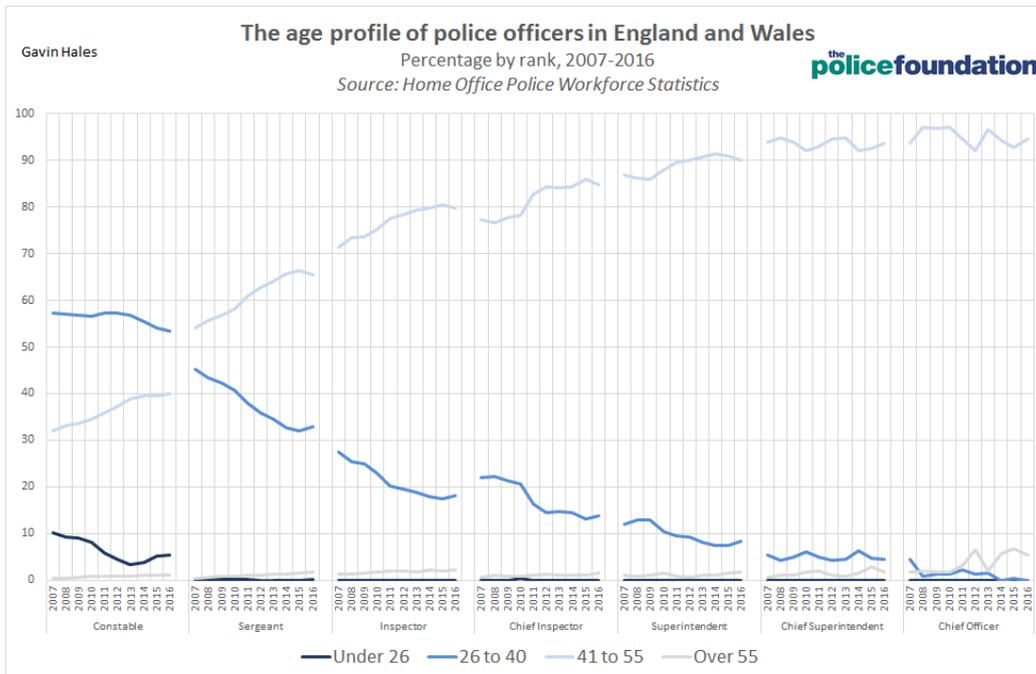


## The age profile of police officers

Given that overall police officer numbers have been falling, what can we find out about who is left? Perhaps the most striking finding from the Home Office data is that officers are getting older on average – almost a half (48.1 per cent) are now aged over 40, compared to around two-fifths (39.1 per cent) in 2007 (the rather broad age categories are as reported by the Home Office).



Rather than rely on these headline data, however, we can also examine the age profiles of the different ranks and, in addition, how these have changed over time.



Here we see that in broad terms age increases with rank (as we might expect), and that all ranks up to Superintendent have been getting older since 2007. Around two-fifths (40.1 per cent) of

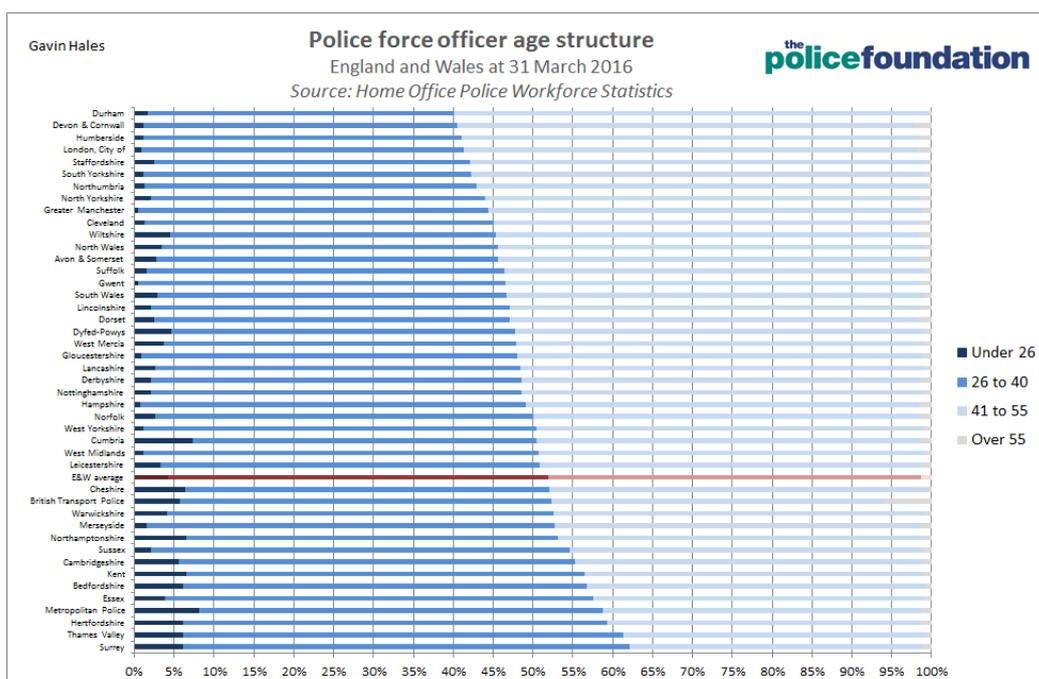
Constables are now over 40 years old, as are two-thirds (65.4 per cent) of Sergeants and four-fifths (79.8 per cent) of Inspectors. There are few signs of workforce replenishment, particularly under the recruitment slow-downs and freezes introduced since 2010 – note how proportionately few Constables aged under 26 there have been, particularly in recent years.

Significantly, we can see signs during the period of what may well be a large cohort of officers passing from their 30s to their 40s in the same rank – no doubt in part reflecting relatively few promotion opportunities in recent years. We can also see a marked step up in the age profile from Constable to Sergeant that isn't evident in the gaps between other ranks, which might suggest this is the major promotion bottleneck in the police service. And indeed, when we look at the ratio of those at each rank to the next one up, it is: there are 5.2 Constables for every Sergeant, but only, for example, 3.3 Sergeants for every Inspector.

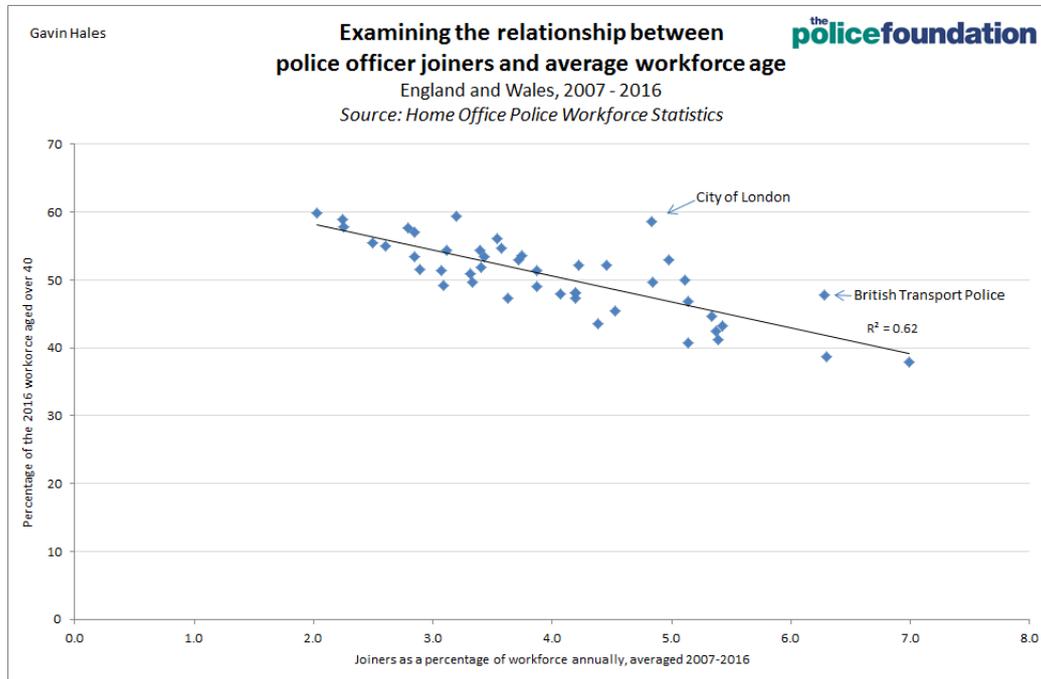
Rank	Headcount at 31 March 2016	Headcount as a multiple of the next rank up
Constable	101,328	5.2
Sergeant	19,563	3.3
Inspector	5,897	3.6
Chief Inspector	1,631	2.0
Superintendent	825	2.5
Chief Superintendent	329	1.6
Chief Officer	201	-

### Individual police force age structures

Finally, it should be said that some forces have much older police officer workforce profiles than others and we can chart these from the Home Office data as well – here ranked by percentage of the workforce aged over 40 on 31 March 2016, from top (highest) to bottom (lowest). The former include three-fifths of the officers in Durham (59.9 per cent), Devon and Cornwall (59.4 per cent) and Humberside (59.0 per cent), while at the other end all forces are in the south east, centred geographically on the Metropolitan Police where only two-fifths (41.3 per cent) were over 40.



We can see, further, that there is a *strong negative correlation* ( $R^2=0.62$ ) between the average of the percentage of the workforce who joined each year over the period from 2006/07 to 2015/16 (as a proxy for ‘lots of recruitment activity’) and the percentage of the workforce aged over 40 in 2016. In other words, forces with lower rates of recruitment generally have a greater proportion of older officers. (Incidentally, removing the City of London Police and British Transport Police points from the data, results in the  $R^2$  value rising to 0.73, indicating an even stronger correlation).



## Concluding thoughts

So what might the implications of this ageing police officer workforce be? I have some suggestions but can imagine there may be many others:

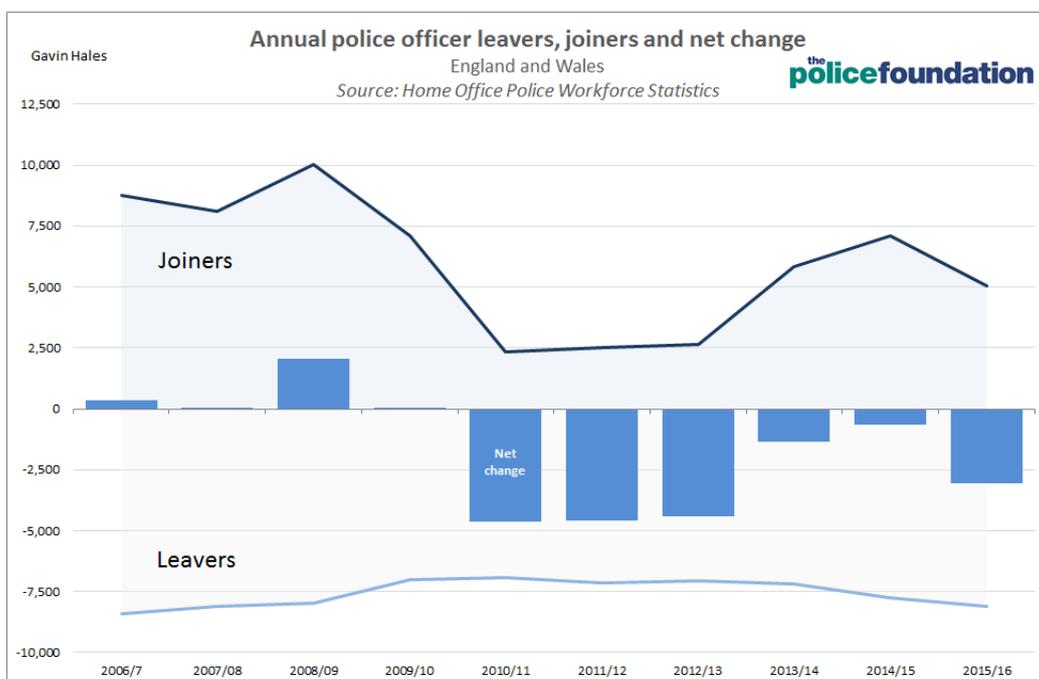
1. First, the ageing workforce may represent greater levels of experience, which should be a good thing – unless that is offset by things like burnout. I’ve heard quite a lot anecdotally about officers with around 15 to 20 years of service feeling increasingly disaffected with their job but also financially unable or unwilling to leave, notably due to their pension arrangements.
2. Related, particularly at Constable level, it seems reasonable to expect that the physical and other demands of the job will become more problematic as the workforce ages, particularly as the workforce also contracts. As we have seen above, medical retirements have increased (except in the most recent year) and this upward trend might be expected to continue. Although I’m not sure I’ve seen any good analysis of how the workload per head has changed – surely an urgent gap – anecdotal evidence suggests it has been increasing.
3. Given that for many crime types both victimisation and offending are concentrated in the teens and early-20s, there may well be risks that the ageing workforce will increasingly less well understand changing social and cultural phenomena – including familiarity with emerging technologies – which may in turn translate into less efficient and effective policing. This is, in effect, an age-related diversity problem.
4. Given the way that pay has been linked to both rank and also years of service, an ageing workforce seems likely to be an increasingly expensive workforce (per head), which all-else-

being-equal will serve to limit the scope for increases in officer numbers as budgets continue to stall or contract. That will of course change if increasing numbers reach retirement age or otherwise leave the service (see the ‘permeability’ point below).

5. Finally, there is a workforce planning point – something I understand (notably from my involvement in the College of Policing Leadership Review) individual forces and especially the police service as a whole is pretty poor at. How well does the service understand the implications of these demographic trends, and how they interact with pension and other provisions, but also the changing nature of demand, for future recruitment and other requirements? Presumably at some point increasing numbers will be leaving the service – there might even be some retirement surges resulting from historical bursts of recruitment activity. Amongst other things that implies potential for rapid losses of experience, but also opportunities, in particular to further diversity in the police workforce through recruitment.

Although recruitment activity began to pick up in 2013/14 after a 3-year virtual freeze (see below) the pace of recruitment slowed in the most recent year for which we have data (2015/16). There have also been signs that the age of recruits may be rising – in 2013 the Home Office reported that the average age of recruits was ‘at least 26’.<sup>2</sup> It seems likely that more graduates entering policing will serve to keep the average age of new joiners somewhat higher than has been the case in the past. Whether the apprenticeship route of entry will act to mitigate that may depend on whether apprentices make up a meaningful proportion of recruits and whether the schemes are attractive to younger candidates.

There is also an increasing volume of talk in policing – at least from the College and some chief officers – about the service becoming increasingly ‘permeable’, with expectations – reflecting wider social and job market trends and, I understand, practical experience – that today’s recruits will be less likely than their older colleagues to see policing as a career for life. That may in time lead to falls in average age (but also experience levels) in policing. For now, however, it seems it should be the ageing workforce occupying minds.



<sup>2</sup> <https://www.gov.uk/guidance/police-pay-winsor-review>