

# The briefing

Series 1, Edition 4 – March 2009



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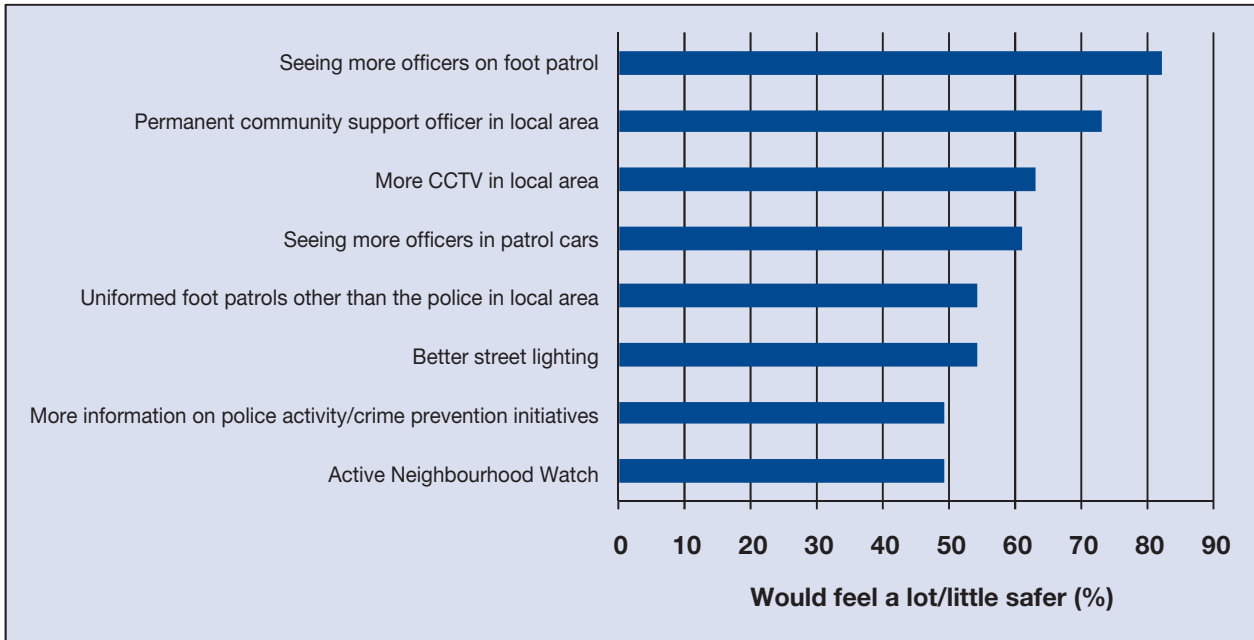
## Police Community Support Officers

This Police Foundation Briefing explains the PCSO role, looking at their powers, their training and their impact on policing. The briefing aims to identify key issues such as their relationship with the police and their future role.

Police Community Support Officers (PCSOs) were introduced in 2002 by the then Home Secretary, David Blunkett, as part of the Government's new Neighbourhood Policing Programme. Their main role is to help the police tackle low-level crime, anti-social behaviour and nuisance and to reassure the public by providing a visible police presence. Uniformed officers patrol the community on foot, engage with and get to know the community, provide an accessible point of contact between the public

and the police, and help local people feel more secure. The public believe that the police do not always have time to respond to minor nuisance and disorder issues and they are therefore reluctant to bother them with their concerns<sup>(1)</sup>. The presence of a familiar, community-based PCSO patrolling the street is intended to improve communication with the police and increase public confidence. Indeed, the British Crime Survey found that more police officers on foot patrol and permanent, locally-based PCSOs

Fig 1. Public views on what would make them feel safest in their local area 2004/05 BCS



were the most important factors in making people feel safer in their local area (see Figure 1).

PCSOs come under the authority of Chief Constables and have a range of police powers. Officially, they are police support staff employed by the police authority, in contrast to police officers who hold the office of constable under the Crown. The average pay of a PCSO is between £15k and £17k, but higher (at around £20k) in London. This compares with a starting pay of approximately £23k for a police officer (£29k in London). They are not meant to replace police officers; indeed the original intention was for PCSOs to develop a separate and distinctive role as the eyes and ears of the community, increasing order and safety in neighbourhoods and engaging with the public rather than enforcing the law. If confronted with a dangerous situation, their brief is not to intervene, but to inform the police.

There are currently over 16,000 PCSOs, in the UK, representing some 10 per cent of the police service<sup>(2)</sup>. The original government target of 24,000 set in November 2006 was reduced in response to representations by the police

that neighbourhood policing could be sufficiently well served with fewer PCSOs. The Home Office nevertheless announced an increase in PCSOs<sup>(3)</sup> when it committed an additional £315m to Neighbourhood Policing for 2007/8, a 41 per cent increase on 2006/7.

Currently, PCSOs do not wear a standardised uniform and many forces do not allow them to wear the force crest. They do however carry a police radio and while most forces provide protective vests, PCSOs are not equipped with a baton, handcuffs or CS spray. The Casey Review found that the overwhelming majority (87 per cent) of the public would like PCSOs to wear a standard uniform, but a review carried out by the NPIA stated that a single standard uniform would be unnecessarily expensive and recommended instead a list of consistent elements such as blue hat, blue epaulettes and blue tie. The Home Office have indicated the uniform will be in some way standardised<sup>(4)</sup>.

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## What powers do PCSOs have?

The powers of PCSOs arise under the Police Reform Act 2002 (PRA) and the Serious Organised Crime and Police Act 2005 (SOCPA). A standardised list of their powers was published in December 2007, prior to which their powers were determined by Chief Constables. Following consultations with key stakeholders and the public<sup>(5)</sup>, the Home Office acknowledged that the public had no way of knowing what their powers were, with many people thinking they had no powers at all. Some forces concluded that PCSOs did not have sufficient powers to play a significant role in neighbourhood policing, being more akin to community wardens. The government therefore decided to standardise their powers with Chief Constables only having the discretion to grant additional powers. The Order under Schedule 4 of the PRA 2002 now lists the standard powers as well as the discretionary powers a Chief Constable may grant.

### Standard powers

Under Schedule 4, 20 powers are standardised, including:

- The power to stop and search under the Terrorism Act 2000.
- The power to seize drugs and alcohol (PCSOs do not have the power to stop and search for drugs but they may seize unconcealed drugs or drugs found while searching for alcohol or tobacco).

***A PCSO has no more power than the average citizen to make an arrest. Any person can arrest someone who is 'without doubt' guilty of an indictable offence (an offence to be tried in a Crown Court) if a constable cannot make the arrest and the arrest is necessary to prevent injury, loss or damage or to prevent absconding.***

- The power to require someone's name and address in specific circumstances (e.g. for anti-social behaviour or licensing).
- The power to issue fixed penalty notices for a range of offences including littering and cycling on a footpath.
- The power to enter and search any premises for the purpose of saving life and limb or preventing serious damage to property.

### Designated powers

There are additionally 53 powers that can be given to a PCSO at the discretion of Chief Constables including:

- The power to issue fixed penalty notices for dog fouling and graffiti/fly posting.
- The power to issue a penalty notice for disorder for a range of offences such as drunk and disorderly behaviour and damage to property of up to £500.
- The power to stop vehicles to test their condition, including brakes, lighting and steering.
- The power to detain a suspect for 30 minutes for failing to supply a name and address where required (all PCSOs have the power to require a correct name and address – see standard powers above).
- The power to use reasonable force to prevent someone making off.

The last two powers were removed from the proposed standard list and marked as discretionary due to concerns over the risks faced by PCSOs. Although some PCSOs receive training in self-defence, this is at the discretion of the Chief Constable. The legislation sought to strike a balance between providing sufficient powers to assist in a public disorder situation whilst minimising the risks that individual PCSOs may face. A review carried out by the NPIA found that the majority of forces felt that the standard list provided enough powers for PCSOs to carry out their role, although some forces have still chosen to give them some or even all of the additional discretionary powers.

Currently, PCSOs are required under the Police Reform Act 2002 to carry a card detailing their powers which the public seem keen to retain<sup>(6)</sup>, but the death of Jordan Lyon in 2007 (see text box) illustrates how important it is to clearly inform members of the public what PCSOs can and can't do and how their powers differ from police officers.

## Proposed new powers?

In the response to the Green Paper<sup>(7)</sup>, the government pledged to complete an evaluation of PCSO powers by the end of 2008 and stated it was planning to extend PCSO powers to include the power to detain a suspect and the power to issue on the spot fines for graffiti. On the advice of ACPO, the APA, the Police Federation and the Police Superintendents' Association the power to detain was not originally granted to PCSOs on the basis that it could expose PCSOs to high risk situations for which they were unprepared. The proposed powers are also arguably outside the original intended remit of the PCSO to engage with the community rather than enforce the law<sup>(8)</sup> and might in fact make it more difficult for PCSOs to build up community relationships<sup>(9)</sup>. The extension has also been criticised by the Police Federation as a further cost cutting exercise<sup>(10)</sup>.

## How do PCSOs differ from Neighbourhood or Community Wardens?

Different councils use the terms Community Warden, Neighbourhood Warden and Street Warden, but the roles are similar. Community Wardens were introduced across the UK in the late 1990s to tackle anti-social behaviour.

Community Wardens are now part of the government initiative 'A New Commitment to Neighbourhood Renewal', which aims to regenerate communities, improving the quality of life and the environment. The main aim of

*Tragically, ten-year-old Jordan Lyon drowned in an old mining shaft pond in Wigan. Two PCSOs arrived at the scene but Jordan was no longer visible. When a police sergeant arrived he conducted an underwater search for the child. The PCSOs were criticised for failing to enter the water. PCSO's, however, are not trained in underwater rescue and the inquest found that Jordan was most likely dead by the time the PCSOs arrived.*

Community Wardens is to assist the local authority in providing a uniformed, semi-official presence. A Warden might, for example, escort or visit an elderly member of the community, liaise with the council on a housing problem or deal with an abandoned vehicle. Their remit has grown however, to encompass for example dealing with litter and graffiti and looking after empty properties. However, unlike PCSOs, Community Wardens have no police powers, although it is expected that they will work closely with PCSOs, exchanging information and supporting the police as best they can.

## How effective are PCSOs?

So far, there is no empirical evidence to show whether PCSOs reduce recorded crime, or reported incidents of anti-social behaviour in the areas where they are deployed<sup>(11)</sup>.

Although criticised by the press for failing to detect crimes<sup>(12)</sup>, it should be emphasised that their primary aim is to reassure the public by providing a visible presence on the streets, so impacting directly on detection rates is perhaps not a fair or appropriate way of measuring their effectiveness.

If measured in terms of increasing visibility and public reassurance, the introduction of PCSOs seems to have been quite successful. Home Office research found that the public saw PCSOs as accessible and approachable and

that, as intended, they spend much of their time on visible patrol, meeting the community and passing information to the police<sup>(13)</sup>. A survey undertaken as part of the Casey Review<sup>(14)</sup> found that public awareness of the PCSO role was high with 53 per cent of respondents saying PCSOs in their area were doing a good or excellent job. Other research has found that at a general level, foot patrols by uniformed officers (including PCSOs) does much to reassure the public, enhance feelings of safety after dark and generally improve public confidence in the police.

Sir Ronnie Flanagan's Review of Policing published in February 2008 emphasised the importance of PCSOs to neighbourhood policing, and recommended ring-fencing PCSO funding. One of the most important advantages of embedding PCSOs within neighbourhood policing teams is that they cannot be abstracted to other duties. Successful neighbourhood policing depends on a consistent presence of a dedicated team and unlike police officers, PCSOs cannot be deployed to other areas of policing. This ensures a familiar and recognisable presence on the streets is always maintained, encouraging community engagement and communication. The NPIA review found that PCSOs have also been successful in freeing up police officers' time to concentrate on other duties.

PCSOs can also be effective in broader terms. Coming from a variety of backgrounds, they bring with them a wide range of skills and experiences. This helps them connect with a wider public, allowing them to be viewed differently from police officers. In some ways their remit is broader than that of police officers as they can engage in community work that falls outside a traditional policing role. In some parts of the country, PCSOs have been used on beaches, acting simultaneously as lifeguards, on buses to deter attacks on drivers or passengers or criminal damage<sup>(15)</sup> and in schools to patrol the corridors<sup>(16)</sup>.

## Funding PCSOs

PCSOs are funded by a combination of Home Office grants and partnership contribution schemes involving local authorities and other interested parties such as colleges and private businesses<sup>(17)</sup>.

## The relationship between PCSOs and the police

Ever since the idea of PCSOs was first mooted, a major concern has been the overlap between the duties of a PCSO and those of a police constable. Bearing in mind that a PCSO costs a force considerably less than a police constable, there is a real concern that PCSOs may increasingly be used as a cheap substitute for a fully trained police constable. This helps to explain why they were greeted with a rather mixed response from the police service in terms of their role and function when first introduced by the government. The Police Federation has always opposed the creation of an ill-equipped and ill-trained second layer of law enforcers, preferring a fully trained auxiliary police force who receives the same basic training as police officers. The Federation has therefore called for a robust analysis of the performance and cost-effectiveness of PCSOs before it feels it can endorse them<sup>(18)</sup>. However, although some police officers were negative about the introduction of PCSOs, Home Office research suggests that their views often become more positive when they work closely with them, get to understand their role better and appreciate the difference they can make.

In Scotland, with the introduction of Wardens (who have wider powers than PCSOs but are mostly employed by local authorities), initial opposition from the police has largely been overcome. However, concerns still remain that their (greater) enforcement powers could undermine their relationship with the very communities they are there to engage with and

protect and that over time, they will increasingly come to resemble mainstream police officers.

Without a clear understanding of what PCSOs are for, what powers they have and how they differ from police officers, the public will continue to be confused about their role and remain sceptical about their purpose and in particular whether they just constitute a cheap alternative. The Home Office has emphasised that PCSOs are not there to replace the police but to assist them, but some of the standard PCSO powers can expose PCSOs to potentially confrontational situations for which they are ill-equipped, as the case of Jordan Lyon dramatically illustrates. Likewise, the Green Paper on Policing<sup>(19)</sup> has emphasised the need for clarity over the role of the PCSO and also stressed that it should complement, but not replace, the role of the police constable. The paper recommended that PCSOs be integrated into or directly support neighbourhood policing teams.

## Recruitment and retention

The importance of attracting the right people to take up the role of a PCSO should not be underestimated. Forces have found that the capability of new recruits varies enormously, with some able to manage tasks efficiently and sensibly almost from day one, whilst others require more help and closer supervision. Some of the standard powers suggest that PCSOs may be used for more than simply neighbourhood policing and public reassurance and they will therefore need the training and skills to be able to do this.

There has been some controversy over the minimum recruitment age for PCSOs. Initially, PCSOs were recruited as young as 16, but both the Police Federation and the NPIA have called for a minimum recruitment age of 18, as for police officers<sup>(20)</sup>. Physical entry requirements for PCSOs are discretionary.

Some forces, such as Hampshire do not require a fitness test, merely a medical examination. Others, such as West Midlands and Devon and Cornwall, require a basic level of fitness.

As PCSOs work closely with the local community, it is considered important that their make-up reflects the gender and ethnicity of the community they serve. A Home Office study in 2006 showed that as a group, PCSOs are relatively more diverse than other police groups. 15 per cent of PCSOs were found to be from ethnic minority backgrounds, as opposed to 3.5 per cent of police officers and 5.9 per cent of police staff. Likewise, 40 per cent of PCSOs were women, contrasting with 21 per cent for police officers and 62 per cent of police staff. The diversity of PCSOs is therefore an important factor in increasing the diversity of policing staff<sup>(21)</sup>.

There is no national training scheme either for initial or in-service training, as a PCSO's role is particularly dependent on the needs of the force it works for. Their training is decided locally by individual Chief Constables and varies greatly in length and content. In most cases, training lasts between three and sixteen weeks and includes topics such as victim and crime scene management, human rights and intelligence gathering as well as more practical matters such as first aid and personal safety. But compared with police officers, their training is minimal. In Thames Valley Police, for example, police officers undergo two years of initial training, including an NVQ Level 4 in Policing before selecting a specialism such as traffic duties or criminal investigation for which further training is supplied. This contrasts with five weeks for PCSOs, followed by four weeks active patrol and a one week closing course. Once their training is completed, PCSOs can then work alongside police officers before eventually undertaking independent patrol work. The NPIA review recommends that PCSO training and recruitment should be standardised by introducing a national NVQ for PCSOs.

Work by the Police Federation in 2005<sup>(22)</sup> found that PCSO recruits could be divided into two groups: those who wanted to be police officers ('the wannabes') and those who did not. The wannabes were perceived to be more enthusiastic than the others, believing that they had to "prove" themselves, but in some cases they escalated situations putting themselves and any attending police officer at risk. Indeed, subsequent Home Office research in 2006<sup>(23)</sup> found that two-fifths of PCSOs joined with the intention of becoming a police officer in the future<sup>(24)</sup>.

In terms of career development, the same Home Office research found some new recruits were frustrated with the lack of available career progression and over a third saw career progression as joining the regular police force. In February 2009 a report by the Metropolitan Police found that boredom levels amongst PCSOs were high and that they were demotivated, feeling like 'glorified security guards'<sup>(25)</sup>. The sense of a 'them and us culture' between PCSOs and police constables persisted, the report found. Indeed, the Flanagan Review recognised the need for managed PCSO career development, including broader opportunities for PCSOs to further deter abstraction. The report also raised the idea of a PCSO volunteer scheme, similar to the Special Constable scheme.

In Scotland, research<sup>(26)</sup> has identified a number of factors in the retention of community wardens, including:

- ensuring that an appropriate career structure is in place supported by training and development;
- continuously reviewing the pay and conditions of posts;
- securing funding to enable the posts to become permanent; and
- ensuring sufficient wardens are in post to enable the implementation of more suitable/flexible shift patterns.

## Code of conduct

At present, PCSOs are not subject to a dedicated code of conduct, although they are able to join Unison and, unlike police officers, have the right to strike. They are treated as support staff under the control of the Chief Constable and are subject to the disciplinary proceedings of each individual force. So far there has been little case law on the role of the PCSOs, in particular the exercise or overstepping of powers and the use of reasonable force. The limits of the discretionary powers of a Chief Constable in these matters have not yet been tested in the courts.

## Conclusion

Given the decision to leave some powers at the discretion of the Chief Constable, the role of a PCSO is likely to evolve in accordance with the needs of each community. It is therefore feasible that PCSOs will eventually become an important part of the public face of the police force and maybe even the primary point of contact between citizens and the police, especially for low-level crime and anti-social behaviour. Of interest however will be whether the PCSO function will remain distinctive – that of engagement with the community and reassurance policing – or whether the drift towards a blurring of the boundaries between police officers and PCSOs will accelerate and eventually lead to a hybrid police officer role. The Green Paper on policing suggests that there is a need to clarify the role and function of PCSOs, which reflects the continuing uncertainty over their place in the extended police family.

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