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## **PCSOs as the Paraprofessionals of Policing: findings and recommendations from a research project**

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## **The Leverhulme Trust**

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## Table of Contents

Acknowledgements .....	3
Executive Summary.....	4
Defining the Role .....	4
Knowing the Beat.....	5
Looking Ahead and Building a Career.....	5
Skills and Qualities of a PCSO.....	5
Building Relationships: Inside and Outside .....	6
Recommendations .....	7
Project Overview .....	10
The Project’s Objectives.....	10
Main Findings.....	11
Defining the Role .....	11
The work of a PCSO.....	12
Appropriate deployment.....	13
Training experiences .....	14
Long-term projects and problem-solving.....	15
Knowing the Beat .....	16
PCSOs and their beats .....	16
Abstractions and hot spots.....	17
Looking Ahead and Building a Career.....	18
Why become a PCSO? .....	18
To be or not to be a PC? .....	19
Professional development for PCSOs .....	20
Skills and Qualities of a PCSO.....	21
Tools in the PCSO toolbox: Communication.....	21
Tools in the PCSO toolbox: Gathering intelligence.....	21
Tools in the PCSO toolbox: Self-motivation .....	22
Tools in the PCSO toolbox: Office and IT-based work .....	23
Nothing to show for it?.....	23
Older and wiser?.....	24
Building Relationships: Inside and Outside .....	24
Internal relationships: familiarity breeds acceptance .....	25
Internal relationships: institutional undermining.....	26
Internal relationships: PCSO culture .....	28
External relationships: looking past bad press .....	29
External relationships: Of the community?.....	30
External relationships: Keeping an eye on legacy.....	30
External relationships: The importance of trust .....	31
External relationships: Work with young people .....	32
External relationships: Effective problem-solving.....	33
External relationships: Effective engagement .....	33
Summary and Conclusion.....	35
Good and bad practice in relation to PCSOs .....	35
Recommendations at a Glance .....	36
The Future .....	38
Research Methods .....	40
References .....	41
Contact Details: .....	42

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## Executive Summary

This report discusses the main findings and recommendations for policy and practice from a research study of Police Community Support Officers (PCSOs) in England. The research was funded by the Leverhulme Trust and was carried out between October 2012 and March 2013. The methods used in this project were interviews and field observations of PCSOs from six Neighbourhood Policing Teams (NPTs) from two police forces in the north of England. Police officer colleagues of PCSOs were also interviewed. The data was analysed using a qualitative data analysis software package (MaxQDA). The findings can be grouped under the headings: **Defining the Role; Knowing the Beat; Looking Ahead and Building a Career; Skills and Qualities of a PCSO; and Building Relationships: Inside and Outside.**

### *Defining the Role*

In terms of the work that PCSOs do, they have a great deal to offer the communities in their neighbourhood areas. However, the role of PCSO has been undermined by the organisation from the beginning and continues to be in some respects. The role of PCSO was not initially understood by police officers and managers, and these staff members were often left with little to do other than patrol.

PCSOs have come a long way since then and are involved in a myriad of activities. However, if their managers still do not fully understand the range of tasks they can perform, they can still be left frustrated and unchallenged. This is exacerbated by the inconsistency between police forces in terms of the range of powers PCSOs have due to the 'optional' powers which chief constables can confer. Allowing all PCSOs access to all the currently available powers would be preferable, as local practice could dictate which were used most often.

PCSOs preferred to shadow other PCSOs in their initial training periods and might also benefit from being trained by PCSOs, rather than police officers who may not fully appreciate the realities of the job for these workers.

PCSOs have a great deal to offer in terms of their position to take on problem-solving work, but need to be adequately trained and supported to do this successfully.

## *Knowing the Beat*

Considerations of space and place are vitally important to understand the work of PCSOs. Knowing their beats and the people in them well is what makes PCSOs most effective and best able to assist in crime prevention and community engagement.

However, it appeared in the research that PCSOs are easy targets for abstraction to other beat areas when numbers were low or a special operation was on. While this can be a help to short-term work, it undermines the long-term social capital building that PCSOs need to do, and can damage relationships with community members if they have to cancel appointments with them at the last minute. Abstracting PCSOs to other areas undermines the main purpose of the role.

## *Looking Ahead and Building a Career*

PCSOs do not have opportunities for promotion and this has a significant impact on their employment experience. While efforts have been made in the past to provide mentors for PCSOs, these roles seem to have been largely ineffective as they are often done by police officers.

Consideration should be given to more dedicated and detailed professional development work with PCSOs, perhaps given by a more senior member of support staff, rather than a police officer. Regardless of who gives this career guidance, PCSOs need to be made aware of other lateral opportunities in the police that they might do to prevent them leaving the organisation, taking with them all the skills and social capital they have developed.

## *Skills and Qualities of a PCSO*

PCSOs would benefit from a recognised qualification which is achieved either before joining or during the course of their time with a police force. These members of staff can become extremely able workers with a diverse range of skills, but do not have any formal recognition of this in the organisation. This recognition of their skills is also something that should be done in annual or semi-annual professional development reviews so that these staff members can track their achievements better and learn to recognise them.

Aligned to this are issues of current recruitment practice. Efforts should be made to ensure that older applicants apply when PCSO vacancies become available. As many police forces are currently only recruiting internally for police constable vacancies, this is encouraging younger people to apply to be PCSOs (as a stepping

stone into the regulars) which may result in a significant loss of life experience to the PCSO role.

### ***Building Relationships: Inside and Outside***

The most interesting findings from the project came from a consideration of relationships and occupational culture. Analysis suggests that PCSOs can be of great benefit to Neighbourhood Policing, especially if they are in a well-integrated NPT, i.e. treated as equal members of that team. PCSOs who are not well integrated into their teams are less invested in their work and communicate less well with their police colleagues. This means that opportunities for effective neighbourhood policing can be lost.

In general, this research found that *social capital* is crucial to the work of PCSOs. As the role is intended to be the 'public face' of the police, PCSOs are meant to get to know their beat and the people within it well. Building up contacts in the community is vital for this, not only to help solve problems for individuals, but also to find solutions to community issues.

PCSOs generally have more time to spend with local people than their police officer counterparts. PCSOs learn personal connections between people in the community and develop an awareness of the local history of an area in relation to crime, anti-social behaviour, and environmental conditions. Police officers were not always able to develop or maintain such a detailed knowledge of their beat, as they are often occupied with other tasks related to their role (e.g., processing arrests, building case files, etc.) or move on to other areas and/or specialisms more frequently than PCSOs.

What was striking, however, was how this social capital was viewed and valued by the organisation. On the surface, the role of the PCSO is one of community *support* (as their title implies), in which PCSOs serve the interests and needs of the local community. However, when it came to internal police priorities, those PCSOs who provided the most *intelligence* about suspected criminals in the local area were the mostly highly praised and valued. This means that PCSOs are filling two conflicting roles – one as community supporter and one as police intelligence gatherer.

In a sense, it could be argued that PCSOs have failed to resist the traditional police occupational culture which values action over 'social work'. Thus it is important that formal mechanisms are developed to reward PCSOs who do outstanding work in a community engagement capacity, and not just for those who contribute to the most arrests (for example).

However, in order to do this community engagement work well, appropriate training (perhaps by an outside agency) and support is needed. While some PCSOs are very keen to do this work, not all of them were certain of how best to do it. Similarly, I would suggest that police officers and supervisors receive guidance on being sensitive to the community engagement and trust-building work that local PCSOs do so as not to damage their rapport with local residents by reacting in an unnecessarily aggressive manner to a particular incident, which can leave a legacy of ill-feeling.

Overall, I argue that the work of PCSOs is vital to the successful continuation of Neighbourhood Policing. All effort should be made to retain PCSO numbers in the current challenging economic climate. To reduce or remove PCSOs from their beats would do significant damage to the relationship between a police force and its communities. This relationship is vital to maintain and to develop crime prevention and intelligence gathering in a force.

### *Recommendations*

**Recommendation 1:** There should be a greater degree of consistency in terms of the powers allocated to PCSOs across England and Wales. This would mean that there are fewer 'optional' powers open to the Chief Constable's discretion, or potentially none at all. Should all PCSOs be enabled to use all of the powers currently authorised by the legislation, local practice would dictate which were used most often (as is already the case). Thus local need would still be taken into account in the work of PCSOs.

**Recommendation 2:** Ensure that supervisors (Sergeants and Inspectors) have a good understanding of the PCSO role, especially if the supervisor is new to Neighbourhood Policing.

**Recommendation 3:** PCSOs should receive initial classroom training by experienced PCSOs wherever possible. It is also recommended that the period of shadowing on the beat after the initial training is with another PCSO and not a police constable if possible. All PCSOs should have access to 'refresher' training on all aspects of the job, not just specialised skills.

**Recommendation 4:** Give PCSOs opportunities for long-term projects, such as community problem-solving.

**Recommendation 5:** Ensure that PCSOs involved in problem-solving have adequate training on this type of work and are appropriately supported through

resources and time.

**Recommendation 6:** All efforts should be made to avoid abstracting PCSOs from their beats. This is not only frustrating for them as workers, but is also frustrating for the community members they would have seen that day and damages their social capital-building efforts in their beat areas. Regularly abstracting PCSOs undermines the purpose of the role.

**Recommendation 7:** PCSOs need to have annual or semi-annual reviews of their career development with opportunities for lateral movement discussed. This might be best achieved with a supervisor from support staff, as opposed to a Sergeant or other police officer.

**Recommendation 8:** There needs to be a recognised and transferable qualification for PCSOs, gained at a pre-join stage, upon completion of training and/or during the course of employment. PCSOs can spend years in the job and be trained on a wide range of systems and methods, but have nothing 'on paper' to show for it. This is problematic for a role with no prospects of internal promotion in terms of providing evidence of transferable skills.

**Recommendation 9:** When PCSOs have annual or semi-annual professional development reviews, they need to be guided in terms of how to recognise and document the skills and abilities they have gained in their work.

**Recommendation 10:** When police forces open up recruitment for new PCSOs, positive efforts should be made to attract older applicants, as well as people who may wish to be PCs in future. Advertising should stress that the role is not to be viewed as just a stepping stone into the regulars, but is a desirable job in itself.

**Recommendation 11:** For all Neighbourhood Policing Teams, PCSOs must be as fully integrated into the work of the team as possible. They must share the same office space, must be included in all the briefings and operations (whenever appropriate), must have access to all the same resources and be as fully supported as police officers are. Regular team briefings at the start of each shift are good practice here. This not only makes for happier workers, it also makes for more efficient neighbourhood teams. This support for PCSOs must be demonstrated by managers unfailingly and without question, in order to lead by example. Police constables who do not already work with PCSOs in this way will be unlikely to change otherwise.

**Recommendation 12:** Each policing organisation should devise methods for rewarding PCSOs who perform well at the community engagement side of the



role. This could be through formal one-off awards, through opportunities for specialisms or appropriate remuneration. Showing that this type of work is equally if not more valued to enforcement work would make a strong statement for PCSOs as to how important their work is for the police.

**Recommendation 13:** Wherever possible, PCSOs numbers need to be maintained to retain the gains made in public confidence through Neighbourhood Policing.

**Recommendation 14:** Guidance and/or training needs to be officered to police officers who work with PCSOs on being sensitive to the lasting impact their actions can have with members of the public in the PCSO's beat to avoid causing unnecessary damage to these relationships.

**Recommendation 15:** All PCSOs should receive training and guidance on what good community engagement is. This may need to come from an external agency, especially in areas where there has been poor relationships between local people and the police for a long period of time. This training should be offered annually to counteract any unproductive habits which may have developed and review and promote successes.

## Project Overview

This project was funded by the Leverhulme Trust as a Research Fellowship (award number: RF – 2012-332), and the research was conducted from October 2012 – March 2013. The original project proposal sought to consider Police Community Support Officers (PCSOs) as the 'paraprofessionals' of policing, akin to teaching assistants. There is little research on PCSOs and on issues universal to all paraprofessionals.

Previous research by the author suggests there are key issues with PCSOs to explore, significant for other paraprofessionals, such as the role *social capital* plays as a job 'skill' (Abbate-Vaughn 2007) and whether this is truly valued. PCSOs and other paraprofessionals are important in these economic times as they can be cost-efficient. But do they and their professional colleagues feel they are suitable to the task, especially if social capital is vital to the role?

*Social Capital: 'People connect through a series of networks...to the extent that these networks constitute a resource, they may be seen as forming a kind of capital'.  
Field 2008: 1*

### *The Project's Objectives*

1. Establish the social capital PCSOs bring to their work which differs from that of their police colleagues (such as personal attributes and local knowledge)
2. Examine how the social capital of PCSOs is valued and/or exploited by police colleagues
3. Determine what this tells us about their place in the police organisation

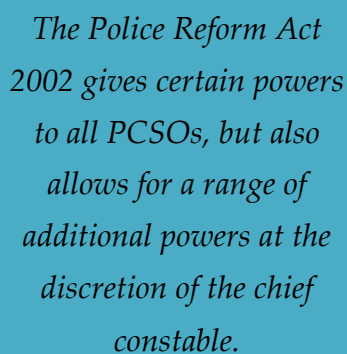
During the course of the project, the focus shifted somewhat away from the comparison with other paraprofessionals. The role of PCSOs in Neighbourhood Policing, their relationships with police colleagues and their relationships with the community became more significant issues for the project. PCSOs' social capital, its use, and its perceived value also remained important.

## Main Findings

In the process of meeting the project's objectives, five main themes emerged from the research analysis. These are: **Defining the Role; Knowing the Beat; Looking Ahead and Building a Career; Skills and Qualities of a PCSO; and Building Relationships: Inside and Outside.** These themes are not mutually exclusive, but they usefully frame the main findings. These will each be explored in turn.<sup>1</sup>

### *Defining the Role*

As might be expected, a large part of the observations involved learning what exactly PCSOs do and how they do it. This is an especially pertinent issue for PCSOs, however, as not only has their role evolved over time, but it is always liable to further change should the local chief constable decide to give or remove certain powers. One of the police forces which I observed had a recent change in PCSO powers (they gained additional ones) and training on these was being rolled out gradually, which meant some PCSOs could use them and some could not. Some PCSOs even reported being trained in the past on certain powers that they did not actually have the authority to use due to miscommunication with the trainers.



*The Police Reform Act 2002 gives certain powers to all PCSOs, but also allows for a range of additional powers at the discretion of the chief constable.*

The result of periodic changes to PCSO powers and the range of 'optional' powers is that PCSOs have a degree of confusion about what they can and cannot do, as do their police officer colleagues and the public in general. This ever-present uncertainty about the extent of their powers, and inconsistency between police forces, can undermine their claims to authority in certain situations. It can, however, also have the opposite effect in that PCSOs can *imply*, or let members of the public *assume*, that they have more power and authority than they actually do.<sup>2</sup>

Even when PCSOs are clear on which powers they do and do not have, local practice tended to dictate which of these powers they used most often. For example, just because PCSOs have the authority to issue fixed penalty notices to

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<sup>1</sup> To preserve the anonymity of the participants, all names used here are pseudonyms.

<sup>2</sup> This tactic is of course is not just restricted to PCSOs as police officers have been known for decades to invoke the 'Ways and Means Act' to achieve certain ends (Reiner 2010: 116).

people cycling on the pavement did not mean that they were all constantly on the lookout for these types of infractions. Local need tended to dictate local policing practice, more so than the choices of that force's chief constable.

During the course of the research, it did not appear that the ability of the Chief Constable to implement a range of 'optional' powers was actually very useful. All it seemed to engender was confusion and frustration for PCSOs, the public and police colleagues. Many PCSOs (although not all) reported to me that they would like to have a greater range of powers at their disposal, so that they could be more effective in their beat areas in addressing low-level issues. While I would not advocate PCSOs having more powers than are currently available in the existing legislation, it does seem that allowing all PCSOs to be able to use the full range of powers, should they wish to, would be a more effective system. This would enable a greater degree of clarity on the PCSO role for everyone; help PCSOs to be of more use to their communities; but without going to the extent of creating new enforcement-oriented tasks for them which might damage rapport with local residents. Local need and local practice would dictate which of these powers were actually used, as is the case already.

*'I'm not necessarily saying that we should go down the route of giving us cuffs and batons etc, but I think there's little things that we could do.*

*Our powers could be extended a little bit and it would be helpful to everybody.'*

*PCSO Gary*

**Recommendation 1: There should be a greater degree of consistency in terms of the powers allocated to PCSOs across England and Wales. This would mean that there are fewer 'optional' powers open to the Chief Constable's discretion, or potentially none at all. Should all PCSOs be enabled to use all of the powers currently authorised by the legislation, local practice would dictate which were used most often (as is already the case). Thus local need would still be taken into account in the work of PCSOs.**

### *The work of a PCSO*

The gradual development of the role over the past 10 years has also had a detrimental effect on PCSOs in the workplace. The PCSO role started out in the early 2000s as mainly involving patrol in neighbourhoods and not much else<sup>3</sup>. It has evolved over time to include a wide range of activities, many of which are done as part of a patrol route (which is still the mainstay of the PCSO job). These activities include, but are not limited to, the following:

<sup>3</sup> Although in some areas the opposite happened in that PCSOs were regularly given tasks to do which were beyond their remit due to uncertainty in their supervisors as to what the role was about and poor training on the role for communication staff (see also Johnston 2005).

- ❖ Monitoring vulnerable residents
- ❖ Working with young people and schools
- ❖ Working with partner agencies
- ❖ Problem-solving in the community (to varying degrees of complexity)
- ❖ Intelligence gathering
- ❖ Checking on known offenders
- ❖ Looking for missing persons
- ❖ Giving fixed penalty notices
- ❖ Scene guarding
- ❖ Road closures
- ❖ Leaflet drops
- ❖ Checking on crime victims to provide reassurance
- ❖ Detaining suspects or young people
- ❖ Administering public satisfaction surveys
- ❖ Liaising with local shops
- ❖ Responding to low-level emergencies
- ❖ ...and many more.

#### *Appropriate deployment*

While to an extent this development is to be expected with such a new policing role, it has meant that some supervisors (Sergeants and Inspectors) do not have an accurate understanding of what their PCSO staff can offer the Neighbourhood Policing Team (NPT).

*'I wouldn't say we didn't have any sense of direction [...] it was just [the sergeant] didn't know how to utilise us because he hadn't been given clear guidance on what PCSOs could do and what they couldn't do. [...] There were never any clear lines drawn as to what we could get involved with and what we couldn't.'*

*PCSO Holly*

PCSOs can thus be left to the most mundane and unchallenging tasks while watching in frustration as their police constable colleagues are given more interesting jobs that they could be doing (and thus free the PCs to do other things). The role can be a dynamic and varied one, if PCSOs are allowed the freedom to explore what they can offer the people in their beats and their police officer counterparts.

To an extent, the problem with unchallenging deployment also rests with communication staff who call on police officers to respond to jobs that a PCSO could do, and perhaps do more quickly as they are already out on patrol. There were also times when PCSOs reported communication staff asking them to respond to calls that they are not qualified to do, again reflecting the confusion

which still exists about the PCSO role.

As PCSOs cannot be promoted<sup>4</sup>, it is vital that they are appropriately challenged as employees. As will be discussed below, PCSOs gather a great deal of information about their beats and develop important communication skills through their work. This social and human capital is unnecessarily lost to the organisation should PCSOs leave due to boredom or frustration.

Preventing this loss will mean ensuring that supervisors have an accurate understanding of the PCSO role and its versatility. This is especially important if these supervisors came into Neighbourhood Policing from a different policing unit, such as Response, where PCSOs do not work. The research findings suggest that currently it is only through working with PCSOs on a daily basis that police officers (and detectives) gain a good understanding of their value and resist adopting the stereotype that they are ‘plastic’ cops with no real purpose.

**Recommendation 2: Ensure that supervisors (Sergeants and Inspectors) have a good understanding of the PCSO role, especially if the supervisor is new to Neighbourhood Policing.**

#### *Training experiences*

During the course of the project, I discussed the initial training each PCSO had received. There was a wide range of time reported in classroom training. PCSOs who were longer in service had shorter initial classroom training (about three weeks). The newer in service officers had spent much longer in classroom training, which involved role plays to act out difficult situations with the public that they might encounter (about six weeks).

After the initial classroom training, most PCSOs shadowed a more experienced PCSO or police officer on their beats to learn their tasks and needed skills in a more practical, hands-on way. As was reported to me on more than one occasion, it quickly became apparent that much of the material they had learnt in the classroom was useless and irrelevant in

*‘What you get taught in the classroom is very different to how it actually is out on the streets. They can’t really prepare you for what you face [...] everything you are taught, it’s a good background but then when you come on to division you have to teach yourself because people do things in their own style’.*  
PCSO Deborah

<sup>4</sup> This is the case for all police forces in England and Wales, except for South Yorkshire Police. However, there are few Police Community Support Supervisor roles available in SYP, so even for the PCSOs in this force promotion is not a likely outcome for them.

the actual practice of being a PCSO.

Each NPT seems to have its own take on what is the most important work for their PCSOs to do, and as such experiences in the classroom can have little bearing on what the job will actually entail. This was especially the case for the longer in service PCSOs who were trained early on by officers who had little idea of what PCSOs could and should be doing as the role was so new.

Those PCSOs who shadowed other PCSOs found the experience to be very worthwhile. Those who shadowed police officers were more mixed in their assessment of that part of their training. While it is helpful to get to know police officers better and to understand the work that they do, there was a feeling that police colleagues do not fully understand the nuances of a PCSO's work and that it would have been better to have shadowed another PCSO.

PCSOs also felt that they could do with 'refresher training', like PCs have. While they do have repeat training on certain skills, like self-defence and first aid, several reported that repeat training on basic skills used in face-to-face encounters would also be helpful so that they do not slip into bad habits. This seemed to be offered in some areas, but not all.

**Recommendation 3: PCSOs should receive initial classroom training by experienced PCSOs wherever possible. It is also recommended that the period of shadowing on the beat after the initial training is with another PCSO and not a police constable if possible. All PCSOs should have access to 'refresher' training on all aspects of the job, not just specialised skills.**

*'The kids come from quite deprived backgrounds [...] and sometimes it's not just about criminalising the kids, sometimes it's about supporting them as well, those that are causing the problems. So getting them into other activities'.*

*PCSO Paul*

#### *Long-term projects and problem-solving*

In terms of the work that PCSOs do, thought should be given to longer-term projects which would involve problem-solving with partner organisations or members of the community. As PCSOs are less desk-bound than police officers they tend to have more time to devote to this kind of work which can lead not only to improved relationships with the community but possibly also significant cost savings through the prevention of worse situations in the future. This would also give PCSOs more stimulating tasks to do and help them and their supervisors to avoid thinking primarily in terms of day-to-day tasks, losing sight of the big picture of

community engagement and safety.

To ensure that this problem-solving work is done well, PCSOs should have access to appropriate training and resources. Problem-solving in communities can easily go wrong (Bullock et al 2006), if not properly planned, executed and assessed (more on this below). This would also involve not abstracting PCSOs from their beats for jobs in other areas as this undermines their work in their own communities. Having to break appointments and not making face-to-face contact for long periods defeats the purpose of the PCSO role.

**Recommendation 4: Give PCSOs opportunities for long-term projects, such as community problem-solving.**

**Recommendation 5: Ensure that PCSOs involved in problem-solving have adequate training on this type of work and are appropriately supported through resources and time.**

### *Knowing the Beat*

One of the earliest researchers of policing, Jerome Skolnick (1966), described policing as a 'craft': something that was learned by the doing of it, over time, and which was perfected during the course of a police officer's career. This applies no less to PCSOs: the more they interact with people in the community the more they perfect the skills of engagement and communication which are vital in their role as the public face of the police. This will be discussed in more detail under 'Skills and Qualities of a PCSO' below.

#### *PCSOs and their beats*

A PCSO's beat is also a vital part of that craft-work. PCSOs who are assigned to specific area to patrol, a 'beat', over a long period of time are able to develop a detailed knowledge of that space and the people within it. This leads to them gaining a working knowledge of where the problem places within that space are, at what times of day they are most problematic and how they can best be handled. They know the lay of the land, what the fastest routes are to various places, where they can go for coffee or rest breaks and where the local key businesses and schools are.

*To take PCSOs out of their usual beat temporarily makes their work far more difficult.*

To take a PCSO out of his or her beat is to rob that PCSO of the majority of his or



her relevant *social capital* and makes his or her work far more difficult. This knowledge and understanding of a space takes time to develop and is why PCSOs seem to be most successful when they are not regularly moved between beats, or when the boundaries of their beats remain unchanged.

### *Abstractions and hot spots*

During the course of the research project it became apparent that PCSOs were

*'You're coming away off your own beat and sometimes that can have quite an impact because people will say to you "I haven't seen you for ages" and it's not for the fact that you haven't been here, it's for the fact that you've been on somebody else's beat doing hotspots'.  
PCSO Ellie*

increasingly being used to 'plug gaps' which existed elsewhere in a neighbourhood area. If there was an operation underway in one beat to address a spate of burglaries, for example, PCSOs would be taken off their own beats and redeployed for a period of time – sometimes for a week or more – to boost staff numbers in the operation.

PCSOs were often tasked with patrolling 'hot spots': areas identified by crime analysts as being likely future targets for crimes. PCSOs would be required to patrol very small areas of a beat, often not their own, for hours at a time. This was not only monotonous, but prevents them from attending to residents and appointments they may have had in their own areas<sup>5</sup>. They are not able to make that vital face-to-face contact with community members and broken appointments are

frustrating for the people who were expecting the police to take their concerns seriously.

The PCSOs who seemed happiest in their jobs were the ones who felt they had a good degree of control over the course of their day and the work they did in their beats. These PCSOs had control over their craft.

**Recommendation 6: All efforts should be made to avoid abstracting PCSOs from their beats. This is not only frustrating for them as workers, but is also frustrating for the community members they would have seen that day and damages their social capital-building efforts in their beat areas. Regularly abstracting PCSOs undermines the purpose of the role.**

<sup>5</sup> Ongoing research at the University of Cambridge also suggests that hot spots only need to be patrolled for 15 minutes at a time and to do so for longer is counter-productive (personal communications with P Neyroud and N Wain).

## *Looking Ahead and Building a Career*

A common theme in my discussions with PCSOs was time: not only of the passing of time in their working day (what makes time go quickly, what makes it drag, how they break up their days, how long to spend on each job, the importance of spending time with local people, etc) but also the unfolding of their career path over time: what brought them to this job, how long they have been in it, how it had changed over time and how long they are likely to stay. It is this latter issue I will address in depth as it has a direct link to the commitment each PCSO described to their job.

### *Why become a PCSO?*

The PCSOs I observed and interviewed for this study ranged in length of service from three months to nine years<sup>6</sup>, and in age from 24 to 56 years old. Needless to say with an age range such as this, there were a variety of reasons as to why individuals decided to join the police as a PCSO. Unlike with the role of PC (Crank 1998, Reiner 2010), there did not seem to be a 'calling' to join up. Part of this will be because the job is so new (comparatively speaking). Part of this is also because the job is often seen as low-level work.

However, once PCSO recruits are in the role and starting to build up their social capital, a moral commitment to their beats and the people within it was often in evidence. PCSOs felt a responsibility to 'their' areas, but the role itself was often still perceived as 'a job'.

In the course of the research, there were a range of reasons expressed for why these staff applied to be PCSOs. These included the following:

- ❖ Some individuals were tired of their previous job and fancied a change
- ❖ Some were made redundant, or were at risk of redundancy, and saw the PCSO job as a more secure option
- ❖ Some were considering work as a police officer but were not entirely sure and so decided to 'try before you buy' and be a PCSO first
- ❖ Others, especially many of the younger PCSOs, wanted to be police officers and were advised to get more experience by being a PCSO for a while

This latter point has become a more regular occurrence as police forces with restricted budgets and recruitment freezes tend to only recruit internally when

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<sup>6</sup> Keeping in mind that as the role was only created in 2002 and the research was done in 2012-2013, nine years is a very long time to be in this job.

openings do become available. PCSOs and Special Constables are thus prime recruitment groups. This means that many people join the police as PCSOs with a view to becoming police officers as soon as possible.

*To be or not to be a PC?*

However, not all PCSOs would like to be police officers, and this includes some of

*'I don't see myself doing this job forever but I never did. It was always a stepping stone to being a police officer and that's kind of put me off a little bit now because I see that they're under immense pressure.'*

*PCSO Deborah*

those who initially joined as a PCSO with a view to becoming a PC later. As these officers explained it to me, during their time as PCSOs they have seen how stretched their police colleagues are, with fewer resources and less support than they used to have before the budget cuts, and so the PC job is no longer appealing. Other PCSOs mentioned that as they joined the job later in life in order to work with and support communities, they have no desire to become police officers and be much more involved in enforcement.

The PCSO role is often discussed in a way that suggests PCSOs are the 'heir apparent' to PCs (e.g., as being 'second-tier' police). In many ways they are: in the well-integrated NPTs, PCSOs work very closely with PCs: sharing intelligence, assisting in arrests and planning tasks and operations together. They wear a similar uniform, use the same radios, attend the same briefings, drive the same cars (on occasion), and do much of the work of the traditional 'Bobbies on the Beat'. This is all good practice for NPTs – those that work closely with their PCSOs and keep them fully included in the team's work were happier and more effective teams (more on this below).

However, while their PC counterparts will be thinking about their next career step and what they need to do for promotion, PCSOs do not have this option. Their thinking about 'what's next' seemed to have three options:

- 1) **Stay as a PCSO indefinitely**
- 2) **Apply to be a police officer**
- 3) **Leave but with little idea of what job to pursue<sup>7</sup>**

It was mainly the older PCSOs, the ones who had come to the role later in life, who were content to remain in the job indefinitely with no chance of promotion. As several were not far off retirement age, they did not have a strong drive to

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<sup>7</sup> I will discuss the lack of a transferable PCSO qualification later in the report.

leave the role and start something new. A few of these officers also told me that they did not feel that they would make attractive applicants for PC jobs anyway, due to their age.

### *Professional development for PCSOs*

For those individuals who would like a new challenge, it is vital that they are offered opportunities to develop within the police force, otherwise the organisation will lose the skills and knowledge these PCSOs have gained over the years. One suggestion for this was mentioned above in relation to problem-solving projects.

Another suggestion is to develop dedicated career development strategies for PCSOs. Many police forces have PCSO 'supervisors' – police constables who have undergone additional training to act as mentors and guides for PCSOs. Based on the findings from this project, this role has not been successful. The momentum behind it faded over time and many of the mentor's tasks can be done by Sergeants.

I would suggest a re-development of this role, perhaps with a support staff supervisor, who could meet with PCSOs once or twice a year to discuss their career plans and the opportunities open to them within the police. This might include lateral movement to other staff roles, away from patrol functions. Sergeants are already very busy supervisors and may struggle to incorporate this additional role into their workload (as they have a full complement of PCs to manage as well). They may also not possess a detailed knowledge of the variety of non-police officer work which might be available.

*'I think I will struggle to stay as a PCSO, as much as I love it, because there's not really anywhere to go from here, there's no real development or promotion'.  
PCSO Brook*

My observations of PCSOs and discussions with them suggested that they rarely considered other types of staff-level work, as the only viable next step for PCSOs which they perceived was to apply to be police constables. Other staff roles, especially those which are not necessarily desk-bound, did not seem to be regularly discussed with them.

**Recommendation 7: PCSOs need to have annual or semi-annual reviews of their career development with opportunities for lateral movement discussed. This might be best achieved with a supervisor from support staff, as opposed to a Sergeant or other police officer.**

## *Skills and Qualities of a PCSO*

This section will consider those attributes which made for effective PCSOs (as judged by PCSOs themselves and their PC colleagues, as well as my own observations) as well as the skills and abilities which are gained through work as a PCSO.

### *Tools in the PCSO toolbox: Communication*

When it comes to personal attributes which are helpful to have as a PCSO, several things stand out. One of the most significant was skill as a communicator. PCSOs who are comfortable speaking with a diverse range of people in a diverse range of circumstances seemed to fare best (and were more highly praised by PCs). These

*'There's been so many times where I've had to talk myself out of [...] a few sticky situations with angry people. And just being able to judge somebody, judge a character of a person and decide how to go into that situation and how to start the conversation [is an important skill]'*.

*PCSO Grace*

are individuals who can strike up a conversation with just about anyone, who can chat calmly to challenging young people, who can talk down an agitated member of the public and who can, through the art of conversation, stall someone who is about to be arrested by a police officer who is on his or her way.

The ability to communicate like this is of course learned and developed on the job, but individuals who join as PCSOs but are not already comfortable speaking to challenging people will struggle. This ability to communicate effectively is a much more difficult skill than it may seem and did of course go wrong sometimes.

As PCSOs do not have the power of arrest, they must find ways to use non-aggressive means to achieve the needed ends. Being able to persuade, to stay calm and to distract, were key skills for PCSOs to have and to develop. *Social capital* emerged as an important way to do this. If a PCSO was being inappropriately challenged by an individual, they could use their knowledge of that person to either control the immediate situation or to request subsequent action by a police officer colleague. For PCSOs, knowledge is power.

### *Tools in the PCSO toolbox: Gathering intelligence*

When asked about what skills were important for PCSOs to have, many PCs mentioned the ability to gather useful intelligence. As PCs and detectives are not

able to be out on patrol in the way that PCSOs are (and especially with falling officer numbers under the current budget cuts) they are reliant, to some degree, on PCSOs getting to know their beats, the people within them and the current events and challenges for the area in order to have up to date intelligence. This requires skill not just in communication but also in observation.

PCSOs who are alert to what is going on around them, who take note of it and pass on the information to the relevant colleagues were highly praised. Those PCSOs who had built up a large degree of social capital in their beat areas were well placed to do this.

*When social capital becomes intelligence it is more highly valued by police colleagues.*

It is interesting to note though that the role of PCSO is often presented externally as the public face of the police in neighbourhoods, in a friendly and supportive way. However, internally the role seemed to be most valued for what it could add to enforcement work. In this context, social capital becomes intelligence and thus gains its value to others in the organisation. For PCSOs, the social capital they develop has uses wider than enforcement, but these are not often praised by their supervisors as they tend to involve the 'softer side' of the role.

#### *Tools in the PCSO toolbox: Self-motivation*

Both groups, PCs and PCSOs, felt that effective PCSOs were ones who could take the initiative in terms of planning work and finding ways to assist police colleagues. From the PCSO point of view, being able to 'make work for yourself' not only helped to pass the time, but meant that PCSOs were more involved in their communities and were more dynamic as support staff for the PCs.

*'I like that a lot of the days are different and we have got a lot more freedom than looking at other peoples' jobs, we have a lot more freedom to do our own work within the role.'*

*PCSO Charlie*

Self-directed work could involve things like developing crime prevention projects or organising local community members to help clean up and maintain parks and playgrounds in the area. PCSOs who were observant and innovative may actually bring in more work for PCs to an extent, but it meant these officers had more

information about their areas and happier and better integrated PCSOs supporting them.

*Tools in the PCSO toolbox: Office and IT-based work*

PCSOs also do a degree of desk-based work, such as updating intelligence systems, logging their own activities, emailing local residents, compiling and distributing newsletters, envelope-stuffing, using the radios, etc. These sorts of IT and manual skills were not often mentioned in the interviews, but were apparent in the observations as skills that PCSOs needed to have or to develop. As police forces often use a range of IT systems, being computer literate is increasingly a vital attribute for all police officers and staff.

*Nothing to show for it?*

PCSOs develop and/or gain a range of important skills and abilities during the course of their employment – to a greater or lesser degree depending on how much they are challenged or find ways to enhance their range of tasks.

However, when a PCSO contemplates leaving the organisation to move on to other work, many are left with the impression that they ‘have nothing to show for it’ when it comes to their experiences as a PCSO. Many of the abilities they have gained are of course transferable to other organisations: communication, observational skills and initiative are valued widely. But the PCSOs with whom I discussed this did not usually see these as something on which they could ‘sell’ themselves externally, as these skills were not officially documented by the police. The College of Policing lists a ‘Certificate in Policing’<sup>8</sup>, which PCSOs can obtain, but it is not compulsory for police forces to offer this. Neither force in my study seemed to do so.

*‘...and then throughout that time you could be given a personal development portfolio, like the police have, where you could have to do certain things, you can’t do arrests and things but you’d have to learn certain things [which are documented]’.*

*PCSO Steve*

**Recommendation 8: There needs to be a recognised and transferable qualification for PCSOs, gained at a pre-join stage, upon completion of training and/or during the course of employment. PCSOs can spend years in the job and be trained on a wide range of systems and methods, but have nothing ‘on paper’ to show for it. This is problematic for a role with no prospects of internal promotion in terms of providing evidence of transferable skills.**

**Recommendation 9: When PCSOs have annual or semi-annual professional development reviews, they need to be guided in terms of how to recognise and document the skills and abilities they have gained in their work.**

<sup>8</sup> <http://www.college.police.uk/cps/rde/xchg/cop/root.xsl/12881.htm>

### *Older and wiser?*

This discussion on personal attributes and skills points to workers who have a good deal of social capital (or the ability to generate it) and a good range of human capital (skills and abilities). These seemed to come more easily to the older PCSOs – those who had a wider range of life experiences from which to draw. This is not to say that the younger PCSOs were not effective in the role – they were, and they often seemed to be more at ease behind a computer screen than their older colleagues.

*I had a chat with another PCSO, Marnie, in the break room [...] She says the PCSO job is about using your life experience and communication skills. It is harder for the younger ones to do it. You need to be able to relate to people in terms of what they are going through, such as being a parent.*

**Field note, 1/2013**

However, the more PCSO recruits are coming from young people keen to apply to be PCs, the more that degree of life experience is being reduced. It does mean, however, that police officer recruits will have more applicable work-based experiences on which to draw. The danger is that a police force's complement of PCSOs will be getting younger, with fewer life experiences supporting them when faced with challenging people or situations. They may also be more enforcement-orientated in their work

and less excited by the community-engagement side of the role. These are generalisations, of course, but certainly in terms of my observations for this project, the newer the PCSO was in the role, the younger he or she tended to be. As mentioned above, this has not been the case historically for PCSOs.

**Recommendation 10: When police forces open up recruitment for new PCSOs, positive efforts should be made to attract older applicants, as well as people who may wish to be PCs in future. Advertising should stress that the role is not to be viewed as just a stepping stone into the regulars, but is a desirable job in itself.**

### ***Building Relationships: Inside and Outside***

The final section of the research findings will discuss nature of the relationships that PCSOs had with other groups, both internal to the organization and external. This will consider the role of occupational culture in these contexts, and how it manifests itself with PCSOs. There have been many decades of writing about police culture, but little to date on that of PCSOs.



*Internal relationships: familiarity breeds acceptance*

As was reported to me on several occasions and has been documented by other research (for example, Johnston 2005), PCSOs had a very difficult start. The press coverage of them was not favourable and their line managers were largely unprepared for this new influx of workers about which they knew little and suddenly had to add to their workload and stations. As managers could give little guidance to police constables about the PCSO role, PCs were not well prepared to make use of these workers who were there to support them. PCSOs at the beginning were largely left to just patrol, and were not well accepted by others in the organisation.

*'The sergeant openly told us all that we were overpaid for what we did, he didn't agree with us, he didn't agree with our role, and that he would rather have five more PCs than ten PCSOs.'*

*PCSO Henry*

This research project has found that in the main, police forces have come a long way since those early days. As has been discussed above, PCSOs are used for a wide variety of tasks now in Neighbourhood Policing. However, one should not underestimate the damage those early experiences did and the legacy they have left for PCSOs. Many officers in the organisation are still opposed to their existence and see them as no more than 'policing on the cheap'.

Overall, this did not seem to be the case with officers involved in Neighbourhood Policing. These constables, sergeants and inspectors have experienced first-hand what benefits PCSOs can bring to the team by saving officers from more mundane tasks and being able to give members of the public that one-to-one service they desire. In those police stations where detectives were being re-integrated into the neighbourhood teams, they reported a new-found appreciation for PCSOs which they did not have prior to the reorganisation. Now that they were working directly with PCSOs and could draw on the social capital which PCSOs hold for their intelligence gathering, they could see the benefit these staff can bring.

*'Since we have moved to [this large area station] and we are easily accessible by the CID and the duty group officers, it's a lot easier to exchange information regarding different jobs that different officers are dealing with, and gaining a successful conclusion to any incidents, we can help them, they can help us. So it is more acceptable that we are of use.'*

*PCSO Chris*

However, those officers in other units (such as response, public order, etc) who do not work directly with PCSOs, are still not very favourable towards them. It was also suggested that officers who were longer in service were more difficult to

bring round to the idea of PCSOs, whereas officers who joined after their introduction and did not know policing in any other way were more open to them.

### *Internal relationships: institutional undermining*

As discussed in an earlier section, PCSOs have no routes for promotion and no recognised qualifications for the skills they develop. In times of heavy workloads, PCSOs can be abstracted from their beats and in the less well integrated NPTs, can be isolated from their police officer counterparts (more on this below). This means that the organisation has, in many ways, undermined the role of the PCSO from the start and continues to do so. It is not a wonder then that some PCSOs are frustrated in their jobs and looking for ways to leave.

The lack of promotion<sup>9</sup> for PCSOs is not only problematic in terms of professional

*'I don't think there ever will be but I think there should be a structure [...] You need somebody that's on the same level as a sergeant and the same level as an inspector. Because we are the bottom of the pile really, and our views are not counted as much. But if we had somebody that was an equivalent rank, then they would be listened to more'.*

*PCSO Lucy*

development and retention, but also because it means PCSOs are in effect leaderless. While they have a line manager (a sergeant), and in some cases a 'supervisor' (a police constable), there are no PCSOs in positions of authority in the organisation. Many PCSOs reported to me that they found this to be an unacceptable situation. They did not feel that PCs and sergeants fully understood what their work was like and would tend to put the interests of their police colleagues above that of PCSOs. If a PCSO was in a dispute with a police constable, some PCSOs told me that they would expect the constable to always be believed before a PCSO.

The Police Federation has exacerbated this situation to a degree in that PCSOs are not allowed to join. Consequently, some of the PCSOs I met were members of a trade union and as such very sensitive towards their rights as workers. They did not offer much flexibility in their working hours or meal

breaks. Of course, they are not required to do so, but it means that the situation exists of PCs and other police officers putting in long, unsocial hours and working through meal breaks next to PCSOs who watch the clock and leave as soon as possible.

<sup>9</sup> Other than in South Yorkshire Police, the one exception to this.

In those teams where this type of working practice was in evidence, the PCSOs were highly bonded to each other, but not as much to their police colleagues. This made for a less pleasant working environment and less happy workers. It also meant that the job of the PCSOs was to a degree more difficult as support from police colleagues was not as forthcoming.

This was by no means the case in all NPTs. In those teams where the PCSOs were very well integrated, well supported by their police colleagues and included in all the briefings and operations, PCSOs were far more flexible in their working practice and happier. They felt they were a crucial part of the team and knew that they could rely on the police officers to support them when called.

In fact, it was in teams like this where I interviewed the police constables who said to me that in reality, it is the police constables who work for the PCSOs, not the other way around. By this they meant that as the PCSOs are the ones who are out in the community the majority of the time, responding to events as they happen and offering that direct contact to the public on which the police prides itself, that it is PCSOs who are the ones doing the high-priority police work. PCs are there as back-up to PCSOs for the tasks they cannot do. These are the teams which are examples of good practice in terms of staff integration and morale. The tendencies towards unionisation and in-group bonding (to the exclusion of police constables) were not as much in evidence here.

*'So all these questions could've been fired to me [at the residents association meeting], but a PC came with me to the meeting to support me [...] I ran the police side of the meeting, but he was there supporting me. And then we went on foot patrol on our area afterwards together. And I feel that's brilliant, that the police will go on foot patrol with a PCSO and will do what the public want to see you doing, a police officer on the streets as well as a PCSO.'*  
PCSO Charlie

**Recommendation 11: For all Neighbourhood Policing Teams, PCSOs must be as fully integrated into the work of the team as possible. They must share the same office space, must be included in all the briefings and operations (whenever appropriate), must have access to all the same resources and be as fully supported as police officers are. Regular team briefings at the start of each shift are good practice here. This not only makes for happier workers, it also makes for more efficient neighbourhood teams. This support for PCSOs must be demonstrated by managers unfailingly and without question, in order to lead by example. Police constables who do not already work with PCSOs in this way will be unlikely to change otherwise.**

### *Internal relationships: PCSO culture*

In terms of the more general occupational culture of PCSOs, there were many similarities to that which has been documented for police officers over the decades (Reiner 2010). Many PCSOs were quite keen to assist in arrests (either by providing useful information/intelligence, by spotting wanted individuals and reporting their location, etc.) and this is often seen as the epitome of police work. PCSOs do a wide range of community-engagement tasks, but all the while many had one eye out for enforcement work which would directly assist PCs in using their powers of arrest.

Other research has also documented this duality for PCSOs (Merritt 2010). This is probably partly due to how the role works in practice – as discussed above PCSOs

*'...It doesn't mean to say they're not engaging with the public, there isn't a stat sheet to say how many people you have spent ten or fifteen minutes listening to, that doesn't get marked down anywhere. And I feel that is more important.'*

*'PCSO Chris*

are often seen as the heir-apparent to PCs and can work closely with them in enforcement-related activities. It is also related to the way in which PCSOs receive praise for their work by managers and above. I spoke to several PCSOs who had received formal recognitions for outstanding performance. Most of these were not related to community engagement or for having the best range of social capital in a team. They tended to be awarded to PCSOs who assisted in capturing suspects in a dramatic way, who devised new methods for gathering intelligence, etc.

Thus the police organisation itself tends to encourage PCSOs to adopt an enforcement mind-frame by rewarding this type of work, which is not the main object of the role. PCSOs who choose to focus their efforts on being a link between the community and police and assisting vulnerable residents (for example) were not often singled out for praise.

Encouraging a direct association between the work of PCSOs and the work of PCs is not ideal practice. These members of staff will always fall short when compared to PCs as their powers are far more limited. It can lead to certain expectations that managers are not able to meet, which will leave PCSOs frustrated and unhappy. It could also lead to the main focus of the role, being the public face of the police and community engagers, being undervalued and neglected at times. This lends added support to **Recommendation 6** (above) as it will help PCSOs to maintain an appropriate balance between engagement with the community and policing that community.

**Recommendation 12: Each policing organisation should devise methods for rewarding PCSOs who perform well at the community engagement side of the role. This could be through formal one-off awards, through opportunities for specialisms or appropriate remuneration. Showing that this type of work is equally if not more valued to enforcement work would make a strong statement for PCSOs as to how important their work is for the police.**

*External relationships: looking past bad press*

The primary role of PCSOs is to work in and with the local community. PCSOs are expected to spend the majority of their time out on patrol, and thus their relationships with members of the public were a large element of the research project.

The initial media reporting around PCSOs when the role was first created was largely negative. Since then, occasional 'horror story' reports have emerged about PCSOs. The day-to-day experiences of PCSOs, however, do not support this negative view of them and their work. The PCSOs I observed did of course have problematic encounters with the public, but they also had many positive experiences and clearly made a difference to the lives of people on their beats. I have seen the look of relief in previously anxious faces when the PCSO arrived to address an anti-social behaviour issue with a neighbour, or the appreciation shown by a burglary victim that the police cared enough to send someone round to talk to them about their traumatic event, even after the initial report was taken and any evidence collected.

This type of work and countless other tasks like it are all jobs which do not require a warranted police officer to perform them. The fact that someone from 'the police' was taking a person's issue seriously was enough. This work is the type which will get pushed to the back burner by over-stretched police officers but is very significant in the day-to-day lives of the people involved. Thus having a number of PCSOs in any NPT is vitally important if the police are to maintain that direct, face-to-face contact that the public crave and which seems to have an impact on police legitimacy (Bradford et al 2009, Myhill and Bradford 2012).

*'You don't see many police officers out there, walking and talking to the public, going, speaking to the community. You don't see a lot because they've not got the time, they do other things. They only attend for when there's something going on but what I do, I just go out there and meet people, visit schools, show visibility on the streets and reassure the community.'*

*PCSO Dave*

**Recommendation 13: Wherever possible, PCSOs numbers need to be maintained to retain the gains made in public confidence through Neighbourhood Policing.**

*External relationships: Of the community?*

Some interesting nuances emerged in the way PCSOs interact with members of their communities. For those PCSOs who are able to stay in one beat area for an extended period of time, they get to know many individuals in that area, as well as the schools, local businesses and public sector agencies. Thus in a way, the PCSOs become members of that community through virtue of their work within it (as most do not live within the beats they patrol).

However, as members of the police who are encouraged by their organisations to adopt an enforcement approach to their work as well, they are also sensitive to

those people and events which may be at best undesirable and at worst illegal. This means that PCSOs must negotiate a tension of being 'of' a community and policing it at the same time.

*The PCs were patting Charlie on the back. He clearly was getting praise for reacting so quickly and helping the police to arrest the suspects [...] The Neighbourhood Beat Officer said that the boss (Inspector) is really pleased. We caught two of our burglary targets!*  
**Field note 12/2012, after PCSO Charlie spotted and detained two suspects.**

In the more urban/working class areas which I observed, the balance seemed to tip towards the enforcement type work rather than the engagement work. The tone of the briefings in these areas could at times be almost combative as the police officers and PCSOs prepared themselves for the day ahead. The PCSOs were just as ready as the PCs to find the local 'scum' so that they could get what they 'deserved'.

In the areas which were more rural or affluent, the combative tone was not in evidence to the same degree and the balance was tipped in favour of engagement activity. While there could still be

significant crime issues in these areas, such as burglary, the staff here did not seem to be bracing themselves for battle each morning. The context in which PCSOs work has a large bearing on what their experiences are and how they relate to the members of the public which they encounter.

*External relationships: Keeping an eye on legacy*

In all the areas, PCSOs have an awareness that their activities and interactions

with the public leave a legacy. Unlike response PCs and even some neighbourhood officers, PCSOs know that they will be visiting the same areas and often seeing the same people again and again. They are sensitive to the fact that to act too aggressively or to not address an issue properly will leave a lasting impression, and not one that they will be able to ignore in future.

PCSOs are also sensitive to instances when PCs are called in to address an issue that a PCSO has started, but take an 'all guns blazing' approach. Even if it is clearly not the PCSO who took the aggressive stance, they have experienced cases where PCSOs are now regarded negatively as they are members of the police, like PCs. Even a short encounter with an aggressive police officer can undo weeks, if not months, worth of work building up trust and relationships with a community.

*Because PCSOs are there to do the lighter stuff, PCs get the more serious stuff and then move on to other things so they don't worry about legacy of their actions. PCSO Tim sees the same people all the time so has to be careful how he goes about things, in case there are negative consequences at a later date.*

**Field note 10/2012**

**Recommendation 14: Guidance and/or training needs to be officered to police officers who work with PCSOs on being sensitive to the lasting impact their actions can have with members of the public in the PCSO's beat to avoid causing unnecessary damage to these relationships.**

*'And as they get to know you, and they get to know your face, and that comes from you talking to people, introducing yourself, and as that builds as time goes on, you gain peoples trust, and once you've done that, you've integrated yourself within the community [...] and they know if you're telling you something in confidence, then that confidence is not betrayed.'*

*PCSO Henry*

*External relationships: The importance of trust*

This issue of trust is very important for PCSOs. In order to build up contacts in their areas who are willing to speak to them and pass on useful information, PCSOs must put in a good deal of time and effort through making personal contact with those individuals on a regular basis. There needs to be regular sightings of the same PCSO and friendly interaction with that person for trust to develop. It is then through that trust that a PCSO's social capital can develop into more detailed intelligence.

Trust between PCSOs and community members also allows the PCSOs to have greater access to resources in the community that they may be

able to utilise for problem-solving initiatives, as this process of building up trust through regular contact also applies to local businesses and security staff. Shop workers and security officers are well positioned to report to PCSOs on events happening in their area and who the regular troublemakers are. When PCSOs support local staff in preventing petty theft or in catching the culprits, these workers are more inclined to pass on intelligence to the PCSOs.

This reciprocity in some cases even involved PCSOs giving certain managers (who had been cleared in advance) a list of local suspects, complete with photographs. PCSOs were often welcomed into shop CCTV rooms to watch the monitors and look out for trouble happening or known problem people. These relationships may be enhanced by the fact that PCSOs are staff, not police officers, as the shop workers are. Thus they are on a more equal footing with each other. Thus, PCSOs will have an easier time accessing and a better understanding of the local resources which may be available to them.

*External relationships: Work with young people*

PCSOs who spend a long period of time in a particular beat area will also be able to see the local young people grow up. For some, depending on how long they have worked in the area, this could even apply to children that they first met as primary school pupils. This gives the PCSOs a unique, long-term view of those 'youths' who can cause regular annoyance to local residents when they get to be teenagers, and a more rounded view of why they may be acting in a certain way.

As mentioned above, PCs who spend a more limited time out in the local community, who are response officers or who move frequently between policing specialisms may not have this level of contextual awareness for recurring issues with young people. PCSOs are better placed to initiate and carry out problem-solving activities with these young people, should they be needed. As PCSOs do not have the power of arrest, they are more inclined to try various methods to address recurring issues, rather than 'throwing in the towel' and taking a more formal enforcement route too soon with a young person.

*'That can be quite rewarding especially when you work in children's homes and doing concentrated work [...] the transformation that a particular girl that I worked with, the transformation she went through in the two and a half years I worked with her. She really did change and it was quite a sad circumstance why she ended up in care originally, so I always find that quite rewarding because that's where you see the biggest results.'*

*PCSO Grace*



### *External relationships: Effective problem-solving*

However, it became apparent through the research that PCSOs do not have any,

*The park on PCSO Paul's beat had an anti-social behaviour problem when he first started. They developed diversion projects with the park staff to get local young people to stop doing ASB there. One project is a football club with the local league team on Friday and Saturday nights. Some kids do go to the club and enjoy it.*

*Field note 11/2012*

or at best very little, formal training or guidance on what problem-solving policing is about, how it is best executed and evaluation of its impact afterwards. I did learn about several activities which had taken place in the past under the 'problem-solving' banner and some PCSOs were clearly highly motivated to do this kind of work. The projects I learned about ranged from giving a group of young people 'a good talking to', to long-term diversion projects involving a local football team or sport centre. These issues are taken up above in **Recommendations 4 and 5** about the need for training and support in problem solving.

As has been shown, PCSOs are well placed to do problem-solving work as they get to know the people, the places and the resources open to them in a community. If they have worked in that community for an extended period of time, they

will have a well-rounded view of the current problems and will be trusted (if they have built up a good deal of social capital through friendly interaction) to carry out the proposed interventions and activities. If they have been able to assist local businesses and residents with their low-level problems or anti-social behaviour issues, there may be a good number of people willing to get involved in project to reciprocate.

### *External relationships: Effective engagement*

Considering the above, it is vitally important that PCSOs are given sufficient training on **how to do engagement work**. Knowing the best way to engage with local residents, what counts as good engagement and what does not and how to maintain those connections is not necessarily obvious or innate. Observations for the project suggested that community areas which were already highly bonded to each other in terms of their social capital (both in working class areas and in more affluent areas) were difficult for PCSOs to gain access to as members of that community. Gaining the trust and openness of areas like that is a challenging task.

Considering that good and regular engagement with local people and businesses

is the foundation to detailed intelligence, public reassurance and community problem-solving, it deserves formal support and training. These skills should also be renewed annually, to counteract any unhelpful habits which may have developed and to review successful ongoing work. Consideration should be given to sourcing this training from an outside agency, especially in areas where relationships with the police have historically been problematic. In these areas, more thinking 'outside of the box' may be needed to break down long-held barriers between the community and the police.

**Recommendation 15: All PCSOs should receive training and guidance on what good community engagement is. This may need to come from an external agency, especially in areas where there has been poor relationships between local people and the police for a long period of time. This training should be offered annually to counteract any unproductive habits which may have developed and review and promote successes.**

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## Summary and Conclusion

This report has considered the main findings from a six-month observational study of PCSOs in two police forces in England. Six Neighbourhood Policing Teams were observed for a total of over 350 hours and 34 interviews were conducted with PCSOs and police constable colleagues. While the PCSO role has encountered many challenges since its creation in 2002, this research has revealed that it offers significant and effective enhancement to the project of Neighbourhood Policing. PCSOs are able to undertake the tasks that busy PCs may not be able to do due to time constraints or low staffing, but which are no less significant for the members of the local community. Being able to meet the needs of the community, no matter how small they may seem, in well-handled face-to-face encounters is vitally important in developing police legitimacy. The high visibility offered by PCSOs through their regular presence on patrol and at neighbourhood events (for example) can have a positive effect on how that police force is viewed as a whole, which can lead to more support from the public.

### *Good and bad practice in relation to PCSOs*

The ethos behind Neighbourhood Policing is that each Neighbourhood Policing Team needs to tailor its work to the needs of the local community. In this context, it is not surprising that PCSOs are utilised in different ways. However, some areas of good and bad practice can be identified which will be applicable generally.

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#### Good practice

Fully integrating PCSOs into the Neighbourhood Policing Team

Providing opportunities for PCs and PCSOs to work directly together

Daily contact between PCSOs and other police officers, such as detectives

Demonstrating trust that PCSOs are getting on with their work

Opportunities for PCSOs to develop their own projects or problem-solving

Rewarding good community engagement

PCSOs being trained by other, experienced, PCSOs

Regular team briefings at the start of each shift which include PCSOs

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#### Bad practice

Separate offices for PCSOs – this isolates them

Regularly abstracting PCSOs to other beats, for long or short periods

No training for PCSOs on how to do problem solving or engagement work

Openly questioning the value of PCSOs

Little or no guidance on professional development for PCSOs

Little or no effort made to retain PCSOs and their social capital

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### *Recommendations at a Glance*

This report offers 15 recommendations for enhancing the role and working experience of PCSOs. As most police forces are facing extensive cuts in their budgets, it would of course be difficult to implement all the recommendations at once. The following table organises the recommendations in terms of high and low priority as well as short-term and long-term initiatives.

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#### High priority recommendations

**Recommendation 1:** There should be a greater degree of consistency in terms of the powers allocated to PCSOs across England and Wales.

**Recommendation 2:** Ensure that supervisors (Sergeants and Inspectors) have a good understanding of the PCSO role, especially if the supervisor is new to Neighbourhood Policing.

**Recommendation 4:** Give PCSOs opportunities for long-term projects, such as community problem-solving.

**Recommendation 5:** Ensure that PCSOs involved in problem-solving have adequate training on this type of work and are appropriately supported through resources and time.

**Recommendation 6:** All efforts should be made to avoid abstracting PCSOs from their beats.

**Recommendation 7:** PCSOs need to have annual or semi-annual reviews of their career development with opportunities for lateral movement discussed.

**Recommendation 8:** There needs to be a recognised and transferable qualification for PCSOs, gained at a pre-join stage, upon completion of training and/or during the course of employment.

**Recommendation 11:** For all Neighbourhood Policing Teams, PCSOs must be as fully integrated into the work of the team as possible.

**Recommendation 12:** Each policing organisation should devise methods for rewarding PCSOs who perform well at the community engagement side of the role.

**Recommendation 13:** Wherever possible, PCSOs numbers need to be maintained to retain the gains made in public confidence through Neighbourhood Policing.

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### Lower priority recommendations

**Recommendation 3:** PCSOs should receive initial classroom training by experienced PCSOs wherever possible. It is also recommended that the period of shadowing on the beat after the initial training is with another PCSO and not a police constable if possible. All PCSOs should have access to ‘refresher’ training on all aspects of the job, not just specialised skills.

**Recommendation 9:** When PCSOs have annual or semi-annual professional development reviews, they need to be guided in terms of how to recognise and document the skills and abilities they have gained in their work.

**Recommendation 10:** When police forces open up recruitment for new PCSOs, positive efforts should be made to attract older applicants, as well as people who may wish to be PCs in future.

**Recommendation 14:** Guidance and/or training needs to be officered to police officers who work with PCSOs on being sensitive to the lasting impact their actions can have with members of the public in the PCSO’s beat to avoid causing unnecessary damage to these relationships.

**Recommendation 15:** All PCSOs should receive training and guidance on what good community engagement is.

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### Short-term projects

**Recommendation 2:** Ensure that supervisors (Sergeants and Inspectors) have a good understanding of the PCSO role, especially if the supervisor is new to Neighbourhood Policing.

**Recommendation 6:** All efforts should be made to avoid abstracting PCSOs from their beats.

**Recommendation 11:** For all Neighbourhood Policing Teams, PCSOs must be as fully integrated into the work of the team as possible.

**Recommendation 13:** Wherever possible, PCSOs numbers need to be maintained to retain the gains made in public confidence through Neighbourhood Policing.

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### Long-term projects

**Recommendation 1:** There should be a greater degree of consistency in terms of the powers allocated to PCSOs across England and Wales.

**Recommendation 3:** PCSOs should receive initial classroom training by

experienced PCSOs wherever possible. It is also recommended that the period of shadowing on the beat after the initial training is with another PCSO and not a police constable if possible. All PCSOs should have access to 'refresher' training on all aspects of the job, not just specialised skills.

**Recommendation 4:** Give PCSOs opportunities for long-term projects, such as community problem-solving.

**Recommendation 5:** Ensure that PCSOs involved in problem-solving have adequate training on this type of work and are appropriately supported through resources and time.

**Recommendation 7:** PCSOs need to have annual or semi-annual reviews of their career development with opportunities for lateral movement discussed.

**Recommendation 8:** There needs to be a recognised and transferable qualification for PCSOs, gained at a pre-join stage, upon completion of training and/or during the course of employment.

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**Recommendation 15:** All PCSOs should receive training and guidance on what good community engagement is.

## *The Future*

PCSOs are acutely aware that their role is at stake in the current climate of budget cuts. To remove PCSOs from the police would be a detriment to Neighbourhood Policing, as would an end to Neighbourhood Policing as a whole. PCSOs have the time to deal with events and issues that are low priority for the police, but highly significant to the individual members of the community. Even a brief follow-up visit from a PCSO after a burglary can have a huge impact on the victim's well-being. This kind of reassurance and 'customer satisfaction' is difficult to measure, but it is vitally important for the police to nurture to maintain good relationships

with the public. Police forces that build and maintain good relationships with the public enjoy more support from their communities, which makes the job of policing that much easier. PCSOs, as the public face of the police in England and Wales, are a key element in this. Their restricted powers and inability to resort to aggressive tactics is vital to their success in this regard, as this allows the public to use them as a 'safe' means of communication with the police.

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## Research Methods

This research was a qualitative project, which involved direct observation and interviews with PCSOs for six months. The research was conducted in two Northern English police forces, with three Neighbourhood Policing teams in each. Each team was observed for one month. These teams were selected largely at random, although with a view to observing one urban, one suburban and one rural NPT in each force. Within each NPT, three or four PCSOs were observed during their shifts for approximately one week each. Observations took place in the station and on patrol: on foot, on bicycles and in cars.

Interviews were also held with police constable colleagues in the NPTs. In total, there were 350 hours of observation and 34 interviews. Interviews ranged from about 20 minutes to over an hour. Field notes were typed up as soon as possible after the observations and all the interviews were transcribed. These texts were entered into MaxQDA software for qualitative data analysis. The texts were coded to allow the main themes to emerge.

Each participant (PCSO and PCs) was assured of anonymity in the final report and any publications, thus the police forces involved are not named.

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