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## Ripe for the chop or the public face of policing?

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**Title:** Ripe for the chop or the public face of policing? PCSOs and Neighbourhood

Policing in austerity

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**Abstract:**

Using findings from an in-depth study of Police Community Support Officers (PCSOs) in England, this paper argues that PCSOs should not be viewed as expendable in times of austerity. They have a vital role in Neighbourhood Policing, which is in turn important for police legitimacy. This in fact makes them crucial to police forces trying to save money. PCSOs are uniquely placed in policing to build social capital on their beats which can be used to resolve community problems, prevent crime and gather intelligence. However, to abstract PCSOs from their beats and to increase their powers undermines the strength of their role and the added benefit they bring to police forces. In order for the full impact of PCSOs to be realised, they need to be fully integrated and supported members of Neighbourhood Policing Teams.

**Introduction**

Police Community Support Officers (PCSOs) were introduced to policing in England and Wales with the 2002 Police Reform Act. These are members of police staff with certain limited enforcement powers, some of which are up to the discretion of the local chief constable to convey. The purpose of the role is to provide visible, on-foot patrol in local communities, to improve public reassurance and to reduce demands made of police officers for tasks which do not require the full extent of their powers to resolve (NPIA 2008). Before the national roll-out of Neighbourhood Policing in 2008, PCSOs did not have a designated 'home' in policing (Johnston 2005) and so were located in a variety of policing functions. This issue was resolved with the development of Neighbourhood Policing Teams across England and Wales, and now the vast majority of PCSOs work as a core component of these teams.

The role initially encountered a large degree of scepticism from the public and resistance from police officers (see for example BBC 2006). The Police Federation, initially quite hostile to the idea of PCSOs and which refused to grant them membership, now maintains only a qualified support for the role (Police Federation 2014). However, research evidence suggests that PCSOs have gained a great deal of support from many local communities and from police colleagues (Merritt 2010 and Cosgrove & Ramshaw 2013). In the New Labour government's drive to have a dedicated Neighbourhood Policing Team in every 'neighbourhood area' in England and Wales, these policing auxiliaries became a vital resource in spreading the visible police presence further and more consistently than had been the case before (Paskell 2007).

However, the level of resources available to police forces has changed dramatically since then. The newly elected Coalition Government in 2010 brought with it dramatic and wide-ranging funding cuts across the public sector. In addition, the arrival of Police and Crime Commissioners in November 2012 and the lifting of the ring-fence around funding for Neighbourhood Policing meant that each police force area has more control over its (remaining) budget. In some areas, partial savings have been met through initiatives like closing small area stations and sharing specialist services with neighbouring police forces. Inevitably, the restricted budgets have also meant significant reductions in police officers and staff, from those in the 'back room' to those on the 'front line' (such as by not filling police officer vacancies). It is now estimated that police officer numbers are currently on par with those from 2002 (Caswell 2014). As PCSOs are staff and not warranted officers, they can be made redundant, and some police force areas have indeed been reducing their PCSO numbers. There are currently 13,552 PCSOs in England and Wales (as of 30 September 2013), which represents a drop of 12.5%, or about 1,930 FTE PCSOs over the last two years (Dahni 2013, Home Office 2013a).

What this means in practice is that the entire Neighbourhood Policing project is under threat. With fewer PCSOs and police officers, remaining staff and officers will struggle to provide the face-to-face interaction and visible foot patrol which is central to Neighbourhood Policing. This type of police work not only provides the type of policing which the public seems to crave, it also is beneficial for improving police legitimacy (Foster and Jones 2010, Myhill and Quinton 2010, Myhill and Bradford 2012). To reduce the capacity of a police force to engage directly with local people, in person and on foot, will be detrimental to the relationship between the public and the police. Using findings from a recent study of PCSOs, this paper will argue that PCSOs are uniquely placed to provide that one-to-one contact and personal service which can have wide-ranging benefits to policing, and not just in terms of good relationships. PCSOs are not enforcement focused, are required and enabled to be out on the beat on foot or on cycle patrol for the majority of their shift and in so doing develop a detailed working knowledge of their beat and the people in it. This level of social capital can be of use to the police in many respects: building relationships and therefore legitimacy as well as intelligence-gathering and thus clearing up crimes. However, in order for these benefits to be realised and to continue into the future, PCSOs must be retained in police forces, their powers should not be increased (although there should be consistency across England and Wales in terms of which powers are conferred) and they should be fully supported by their organisations as equal members of police teams.

### **Existing Literature**

Considering that PCSOs have become the 'public face of policing' in England and Wales (Home Office 2013b), there has been remarkably little research on them. The first main writer was Johnston (2005, 2006, 2007) who conducted vital early research on PCSOs in London just after their introduction. He found that as a whole, PCSOs were not well received by existing police officers and supervisors. There was little guidance on what to do with them, including in which areas of policing to place them. There was a comparatively large number on disciplinary measures, which he

attributes to a failure to instil the values of a disciplined organisation such as the police. Johnston's work was therefore focussed not just on what PCSOs did, but on how they were received culturally in the Metropolitan Police. Merritt (2009, 2010, Merritt and Dingwall 2010) has also conducted research on PCSOs, primarily examining their role orientation, which he described as a continuum from 'junior enforcer' on one end to 'bridge builders' on the other (Merritt 2010). His assessment was that more PCSOs tend to lean towards the 'junior enforcer', and thus tend to focus on the aspects of their role which address crime and disorder over those which favour engaging with community members. Other writers on the PCSOs include Cooke (2005) on PCSO visibility and their uniform in relation to providing reassurance, Paskell (2007) on the role of PCSOs in projects of regeneration of low-income neighbourhoods and more recently Cosgrove and Ramshaw (2013). This latter paper has examined to what extent PCSOs can be utilised for community engagement and public participation in policing. Their view, which the research discussed in this paper supports, is that PCSOs have a great capacity for engagement work but are often held back or diverted from this by the dominant enforcement-orientated values and priorities of the police organisation.

In addition to the academic research there have been notable evaluations of PCSOs, especially in relation to their powers and their effectiveness in the tasks they perform. The Home Office conducted its evaluation in 2006 (Cooper et al 2006), which found that while PCSOs have an important contribution to make, issues remained around training, recruitment and standardisation of powers. The then National Policing Improvement Agency (NPIA) conducted a review of PCSOs in 2008, along with follow-up assessments in 2009 and 2010 (see NPIA 2008, 2009, 2010). As of the 2010 report, 18 of their initial 22 recommendations for changes in practice around PCSO tasking, training, management and structures had been completed or dispatched. Most of these were oriented around building consistency in practice across England and Wales. However, as the NPIA was disbanded in 2013, it is unknown whether the remaining recommendations were achieved. Academic institutions have conducted assessments of PCSOs, such as Leeds (Crawford and Lister

2004, Crawford et al 2005) and Sheffield Hallam (Long et al 2006). The Leeds research looked at PCSOs in the broader context of the 'extended policing family' and emerging pluralised policing practices. They found that PCSOs have a positive contribution to make to public reassurance, crime prevention and intelligence-gathering; but that they need to be 'distinct yet integrated' (Crawford et al 2005: x) in the police organisation, i.e., that they are not police officers and so should be used strategically in this regard. The Sheffield Hallam work was conducted largely around practice in West Yorkshire, with suggestions for local changes. Several local authorities have also conducted their own evaluations of the PCSO role (see for example Derwent et al 2010).

These evaluations and research projects are generally positive about the PCSO role (albeit with suggestions for improvement), however, they were all conducted at a time when police numbers were perpetually rising. Neighbourhood Policing was seen as the flagship movement for policing in England and Wales, and PCSOs became a vital component in delivering this method across the country. In light of ongoing funding restrictions in policing, these practices now seem like luxuries, but are they in fact necessities in times of austerity? The research discussed here will explore this issue in relation to what PCSOs can bring to policing and why they should not be viewed as expendable, especially in times of fiscal restraint.

## **Methods**

The findings presented in this paper come from an in-depth qualitative study using observations and interviews of PCSOs from two police forces in England<sup>1</sup>. The purpose of the project was to establish to what extent PCSOs have been embedded in police forces, as it was then ten years since the Police Reform Act 2002. Consideration was given not only to policing practice, but also to their relationships with police officer colleagues, supervisors and members of the public. PCSOs from six neighbourhood policing teams (three teams from each force) were observed on patrol (foot, cycle

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<sup>1</sup> This research was funded by a Leverhulme Research Fellowship, award number RF-2012-332.

and occasionally in cars) for 350 hours over a period of six months (October 2012 to March 2013). These staff were also interviewed, as were a selection of their police officer colleagues, for a total of 33 interviews. The neighbourhood policing teams were chosen largely at random, but with a view to observing one urban, one suburban and one rural area team from each force. Field notes and interview transcripts were analysed using MaxQDA software. Of the 21 PCSOs who were directly observed, 7 were women and 3 were from a minority ethnic group. From those officers and staff who were interviewed, 15 were police constables. Of these, 3 were women and there were no minority ethnic police officers interviewed. This is due to lack of BME police officers in the areas researched and the availability of staff for interview. Three of the observed PCSOs were not subsequently interviewed. Quotes from these interviews will be indicated by the use of a pseudonym for the interviewee, along with his or her rank.

### **The role of PCSOs**

During the course of the observational study, PCSOs were involved in a wide range of tasks. These included those very much on the 'softer' side of policing, such as attending to nuisance calls, speaking to young people 'hanging around', checking in on vulnerable residents, being the mediator in neighbour disputes and monitoring parking outside schools during drop-off and pick-up times. Many tasks which were observed bordered more on enforcement-type work. This included things like detaining a suspect until a police officer arrived, handing out fixed penalty notices, gathering and recording intelligence on suspects, checking on offenders with curfews and conducting 'stop and accounts' under certain circumstances. PCSOs were also tasked with very mundane jobs, such as door-to-door leaflet drops if a crime had happened nearby, transporting evidence from one station to another, gathering CCTV footage from shops and doing 'hot spot' patrols. Throughout all of this, PCSOs patrolled. They walked or cycled many miles each day in just about all weather conditions (extreme snowfall being an exception). It is this latter task which is the core of the role and for which they are uniquely placed. As PCSOs do not have the power of arrest, they cannot be caught

up in the hours of paperwork which usually follow an arrest, nor can they build the case files that their police officer counterparts seemed to spend a great deal of time doing in the stations. PCSOs do start their day at computers, getting caught up on the latest developments in their areas and responding to emails which come in from residents. But after this initial period, they are out the door for the vast majority of the day. This is something which the police officers struggled to do in most of the observed neighbourhood teams.

The difficulty for PCSOs is that while their role is designed to be one of engagement with the public with minimal confrontation, they work within an organisation which is oriented around enforcement (Cosgrove and Ramshaw 2013). A few of the PCSOs observed for the project had received awards for their service from their police force. Most of these were in relation to activities which led to arrests or assisted in gathering intelligence on suspects. For those PCSOs who are very adept at getting to know their communities and spend a great deal of time and energy engaging with and supporting the people on their beats, there were not many formal mechanisms observed for monitoring or rewarding this work. In addition, whenever there is a 'gap' in an operation, PCSOs can often be pulled out of their usual patrol area to fill these. This means that they may miss meetings they had scheduled with local residents or groups and it reduces their ability to make contacts in an area and be seen on patrol there. The tendency on the part of police forces to reward enforcement activity and abstract PCSOs from their beats undermines the entire purpose of the role, and thus the strengths that PCSOs bring to a Neighbourhood Policing Team. The PCSO quoted below discusses directed patrolling in a high crime area compared to assisting vulnerable residents:

Those are good things [assisting the vulnerable] when you actually feel you can help someone but it's like when you're stuck on things. You're given things to do and you think "this isn't going to make any difference to anything". When we have the burglaries I know they stick that many of us in an area, you're all tripping over each other and you think while we are here, there's that many, somebody could be doing something else a bit more worthy, covering a different area. Something a bit better than us all wondering round in circles.  
(PCSO Steve)



Because of the depth of local knowledge which PCSOs can develop on their beat areas, they can build a great deal of social capital. This will include not only local residents, but also other public sector agency workers in the area (such as youth workers, anti-social behaviour teams, local counsellors); shop workers and owners; and private sector services and staff (such as housing providers and security staff). All of these networks and links are utilised regularly to address problems in an area, to gather intelligence for police colleagues and generally to diversify the ways in which 'the police' can be welcomed and active members of their communities.

I like the fact that I speak to people a lot and I like the fact that people, as you saw, give good feedback about me and they are really happy with my presence. I think it's something that's got to do with my personality as well because I like talking to people, listening to their views and the attention is really great, and makes you feel really welcome. Apart from patrolling, you don't feel you're just on your own doing something when no-one knows you, you feel you're part of the community and you want to do your best to get peace and safety. (PCSO Dave)

In order to achieve this level of trust and acceptance in their local areas, the limited range of powers which PCSOs can use has been quite crucial to their success. It is to a fuller discussion of this issue that we will now turn.

### **PCSO powers**

As discussed in the introduction, part of the initial criticism of PCSOs was that they would just be 'plastic police' with little or no ability to intervene should a crime occur. The flaw in this argument is to compare PCSOs directly with police officers; PCSOs are not meant to be police officers and thus the comparison is inappropriate. The key to this distinction is that PCSOs are members of police staff so the powers that they do have are limited and many can only be used in very specific circumstances. While for some PCSOs who were observed this situation is frustrating at times, it was clearly an important element of their success in terms of building social capital in an area and thus gaining the trust of local residents. Several PCSOs and Police Constables (PCs) observed that because PCSOs are unable to arrest and are not themselves police officers, members of the public seemed to

trust them more and would pass on information to them which they would not give to a police officer, as PCSO Henry explains:

Because people will talk to us as opposed to a police officer, they'll come, and quite confidently, say "could you come and see me, I need to have two minutes with you", or "have you got somewhere private where I can have a word with you". 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, people know you, your name, your face, and they know if you're telling you something in confidence, then that confidence is not betrayed. But whatever they do tell us, we can disseminate what's relevant and what isn't, and feed that into the organisation on our intelligence system. (PCSO Henry)

For an organisation created around the principle of law enforcement, it can be a challenge to have a body of staff who are out on patrol on a regular basis, but in such a limited enforcement capacity.

What is important to remember with PCSOs is that while they may be limited in terms of law enforcement, they are greatly enabled in terms of community engagement and opportunities for building social capital. Any discussion (such as Home Office 2013b) around increasing powers for PCSOs beyond those which are already enacted in law should be very carefully considered. To increase the ability of PCSOs to engage in more enforcement work would do damage to their relationships in the community. When asked in interviews which was the 'tool' in their 'tool box' that they used most often, the vast majority of PCSOs responded 'my mouth' or 'communication'. As they cannot resort to a wide range of powers, PCSOs become very skilled at negotiation and discussion, and this is a vital asset to protect, not a short coming. In addition, being a member of 'the police' gives them a degree of credibility, while not being able to arrest renders them less threatening. Combine these with a good degree of social capital and one is left with a formal social control agent who can command a great deal of trust. The temptation to resort to a greater range of powers would damage this delicate balance.

However, the current arrangement whereby chief constables can choose from a selected range of powers to confer on PCSOs in their force was reported on a number of occasions in the research to

be confusing and unhelpful: for the public, other police officers and even for PCSOs themselves, as this field note demonstrates:

*During the dinner break I met a new PCSO, Jacob. He likes the job. It is quite busy and much better than his previous desk job. He said his training was not really related to the real job. They had 6 weeks in a classroom learning what they can and can't do, which is actually really complicated for PCSOs. Jacob says it is harder to train PCSOs than PCs as the law is clearer in terms of the powers for PCs. He is still confused about what his are. (Field note 3/2013)*

The research also suggests that even when PCSOs are clear on their powers, local practice dictates which ones are used most often considering the local circumstances. It would seem that instead of giving PCSOs more powers and risking damage to their relationships with local communities, it would be more expedient to give all the currently legislated powers to all PCSOs and allow local practice to dictate which ones are employed in practice.

### **PCSOs, Neighbourhood Policing and the public**

At the time the research considered here was conducted, the cuts to the police budget were only just starting to be implemented. PCSOs and their Neighbourhood Teams were being moved out of small stations into larger ones as a part of this process, and the majority of the PCSOs who were observed and interviewed confirmed that they were fearful in the longer term for the security of their jobs. They were acutely aware that as members of staff, rather than officers, they did not have the level of job security that police officers enjoy. Their fate was to a large extent in the hands of the soon-to-be or newly elected Police and Crime Commissioner. Since that time, it appears that these PCSOs were right be concerned as many in some force areas have indeed lost their jobs (BBC 2013, Sommers 2014). This has also meant that Neighbourhood Policing in general is at risk. Police officer vacancies are not always being filled, resulting in the remaining officers having to cover more work with less support (Ingram 2013). The danger is that the remaining officers and staff will have to prioritise more immediate and emergency work rather than the slower and more time intensive engagement work often found in Neighbourhood Policing.

While in the short term these changes are economically expedient, in the long term this retraction of Neighbourhood Policing could have quite a detrimental effect on relationships between the police and their communities. While the research on police legitimacy often shows the biggest effect in terms of police contact with the public to be a negative one (Skogan 2006), there is evidence to suggest that direct, positive encounters between the police and the public can indeed have a measurable improvement in police legitimacy with that public<sup>2</sup> (Foster and Jones 2010, Myhill and Quinton 2010, Myhill and Bradford 2012). PCSO Brook describes this from her own experience:

PCSO Brook: And I think by us working with people in the community, it's helping us a lot because they're people that the community trust and so if they see them talking to us and engaging with us, then I think it has a knock on effect on them as well.

Interviewer: So by the police being seen to interact with people that are trustworthy?

PCSO Brook: Yes, they think "ah well if they like them and they trust them, then they must be alright". I think before there was a bit of poor views of the police, they didn't really trust us, they didn't think that we did anything. So I think the main thing now has been a lot on customer service really.

As has been discussed above, PCSOs have the time to spend in direct encounters with the public. This time devoted to developing relationships builds their social capital in their communities, and because their powers are limited, they can be more trusted with information which may be of use in keeping that community safe. Maintaining or improving police legitimacy and preventing crime and disorder can reduce costs to the police in the long term. Thus in times of austerity, having a friendly face on the beat who stops for a chat, not whizzing by in cars with the blue lights on, is crucial. It is within the gift of the PCSOs to do this in the context of Neighbourhood Policing.

## Conclusion

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<sup>2</sup> However, see Shaw (1995) and Corsaro et al (2012) for examples of positive community responses to intensive police activity in the context of violent crime prevention in targeted neighbourhoods.

These are indeed challenging times for the police service. Difficult decisions must be made in order for the police to meet their obligations to the public within the funding restrictions placed on them by the state. However, to view PCSOs as expendable (by cutting jobs) or to try to re-craft them as low-cost police officer substitutes (by increasing their powers) are both unadvisable. Using findings from a six-month observational study of PCSOs, this paper has argued that PCSOs are in fact crucial in terms of reducing costs in the long term for police forces. PCSOs have the ability to gain trust and confidence from local communities by spending extended periods of time in their beat areas, building social capital and utilising the networks there. This can lead to vital information being passed from them to the police, as well as less glamorous but equally important outcomes, such as engaging with the public and developing a benevolent police presence in that community. Their inability to use significant force or the power of arrest is a strength in this regard, as it requires them to act as negotiators and reduces the threat they pose, thus building that needed trust.

However, none of this will happen without the appropriate levels of support from police forces. PCSO numbers need to be maintained, as does the infrastructure for Neighbourhood Policing generally. PCSOs need the back-up of police colleagues, and should too many PC and PCSO posts be removed, this will not be possible. When considering deployment of PCSOs, they should not be abstracted from their usual beat areas unless there is an exceptional reason to do so. Frequently moving PCSOs around, especially in 'neighbourhood areas' which are becoming larger through station closures and amalgamations, could mean that they do not spend enough time in their beat areas to develop the social capital that is vital to the entire purpose of their role. If they are not in the beats that they know with the people they know and the connections they have built, they can be no more than patrolling bodies in uniform. PCSOs are well placed to provide an important, complementary, role in policing to bring a depth to the quality of service the police can provide, which will in turn bring long-term gains in legitimacy.

In relation to the powers that PCSOs have, these should not be increased beyond the current legislated list unless there is a significant case for doing so. The lack of formal powers for PCSOs is an asset in terms of the levels of engagement they can achieve and trust they can build. To allow them more enforcement opportunities would do damage to this. However, the research suggested that a great deal of confusion around the extent of PCSO powers could be avoided if there was no discretionary element and that all PCSOs had access to all the currently available powers. PCSOs are not police officers and should not be treated as such. However, they do need, like any employee does, opportunities for development and for praise when they do their job well. There should be systems in place (where they do not currently exist) to recognise and reward achievement in engagement work which does not necessarily lead to enforcement outcomes. Maintaining and enhancing this element of policing will not only benefit PCSOs, but the police service as a whole.

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