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Diversity of Police Community Support Officer recruits compared to Police Officer recruits in the Metropolitan Police Service (Summary report)

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Introduction and background information

Police Community Support Officers (PCSOs) were first introduced in England and Wales under the Police Reform Act (2002) ¹. The Association of Chief Police Officers (2005) recognised the fundamental role of the PCSO as:

‘...to contribute to the policing of neighbourhoods, primarily through high visibility patrol with the purpose of reassuring the public, increasing orderliness in public places and being accessible to communities and partner agencies working at local level’.

The majority (85%) of forces surveyed in the Home Office national evaluation stated that visibility was the number one priority for PCSOs. Interacting with the public and dealing with anti-social behaviour (ASB) and low-level crime were considered to be the next most important functions (Cooper et al, 2006).

Previous research (Cooper et al, 2006; Johnston, 2006) found that overall, PCSOs were attracted to the role because it was varied and allowed close working with the local community. In addition, many saw the role as a ‘stepping stone’ to becoming a regular police officer, younger males being more likely to cite this, or as an opportunity to ‘test the water’ before applying to become a regular police officer.

Various studies (Johnston et al, 2004; Johnston, 2005; 2006; forthcoming) have highlighted how the PCSO initiative was seen as an opportunity to diversify the recruitment profile of the MPS as a whole. The Home Office’s 2006 national evaluation of PCSOs found that the role had been successful in doing this, attracting people from a range of backgrounds including older, ethnically diverse individuals with wider ranging work experience.

A number of studies (e.g. Johnston et al, 2004; Johnston, 2005; 2006 & forthcoming; Cooper et al, 2006) have highlighted the dual function of the PCSO role in both improving public reassurance and ‘diversifying’ the police service, however, few studies have fully considered reasons why the PCSO role has been more successful in attracting underrepresented groups than the police officer role. The Metropolitan Police Authority (MPA) commissioned a study to investigate this issue further and contribute to understanding the diversity of PCSOs², and the impact of this on the police service as a whole.

¹ There are four types of MPS PCSOs: community, transport, security and parks. Roles, responsibilities and some powers may differ between each type. A copy of the Police Reform Act 2002 is available at www.opsi.gov.uk/acts/acts2002/20020030.htm. PCSO powers are detailed in Schedule 4, Part 1 of the Act.

² The MPA defines diversity as ‘the difference in values, attitudes, cultural perspective, beliefs, ethnic background, sexual orientation, skills, knowledge and life experiences of each individual in any group of people. Diversity in the workplace is an understanding that there are differences among employees, acceptance of these differences among employees, acceptance of these differences so that each person is treated and valued as a unique individual and recognising that these differences can be an asset to work being done more efficiently and effectively’ (MPA, 2005).

For a comprehensive review of relevant literature please see the full version of the report.

The current study³

Overall, this research sought to understand why there was a difference between the proportion of PCSO and police officer recruits who were women, ethnic minorities and from a wider range of ages⁴. Further questions were also addressed to support this:

- is there a difference in the diversity of those who apply to become PCSOs and those that are successful? If so, is there a similar pattern for successful police officer recruits?
- what are the key reasons why people want to become a PCSO? Are there differences in these reasons by gender, age or ethnicity?
- why do so many PCSOs go on to become police officers rather than applying from the outset?

Methodology

A multi-method approach was used to address the research questions including analysis of quantitative data, semi-structured interviews with PCSOs and key stakeholders, and a postal survey of the MPA Safer London Panel.

1. Semi-structured discussions with 16 key stakeholders from the MPA, MPS and Home Office were held. Stakeholders were asked their opinions on what factors they thought attracted people to apply for the PCSO role, any perceived barriers to applying for the role, and some tailored questions depending on their specialist area of work (e.g. marketing or recruitment).
2. Analysis of differences in demographic profiles (in relation to age, ethnicity and gender) between PCSO and police officer applicants and recruits and PCSO recruits and leavers (during the period 1 April 2004 to 31 March 2006) was carried out using the following data:
 - 7,324 PCSO applicants;
 - 4,472 police officer applicants;
 - 1,538 PCSO recruits;
 - 2,879 police officer recruits; and
 - 592 PCSO leavers.
3. Semi-structured interviews were carried out with 45 serving PCSOs. The selection of the interviewee sample was based on analysis of differences in demographic details of PCSO and police officer recruits and consisted of:

³ A full version of the report is available at www.mpa.gov.uk

⁴ Restrictions on resources and data available meant that it was only possible to consider these three strands of diversity.

- 13 Black African (various ages);
- 11 Black British (various ages);
- 7 Pakistani (aged 18-25 years);
- 7 Bangladeshi (aged 18-26 years); and
- 7 White British (one aged 18-20 years and six aged 46 years and older).

4. A survey consisting of four questions was posted to all 2,877 members of the Safer London Panel. The Panel was set up by the MPA in June 2004 to further support the Authority's strategic responsibility to consult with Londoners on policing issues. Only 189 surveys were returned (a response rate of 6.5%) and as such data were analysed as one group rather than looking for differences by demographics. The findings were only used in support of findings from other aspects of the research.

For a comprehensive discussion of the methodology used in this study and limitations, please refer to the full research report.

Results and discussion

Analysis of Human Resources (HR) data indicated there were proportionately more PCSO than police officer recruits in the younger and slightly older age categories, and proportionately more from BME communities⁵. However, there was little difference in the overall gender breakdown of PCSO and police officer recruits. This section presents key findings in relation to why there is more diversity amongst PCSO than police officer recruits, and considers how they can be used to inform efforts to increase the diversity of the police service as a whole.

Diversity of PCSO and police officer applicants and recruits

The study compared the demographic profiles of those who applied and those who were successfully recruited to the PCSO and police officer roles for the period April 2004 to March 2006. Key findings from analysis of data highlighted:

- greater variation in age and ethnicity of applicants than recruits for both PCSO and police officer roles;
- a particularly marked reduction in the proportion of Black African applicants to recruits for both roles: 10.2% to 2.9% for PCSOs and 6.5% to 1% for police officers;

⁵ Black and Minority Ethnic (BME) is a term used to describe communities and individuals who belong to an ethnic group that is smaller in number than the UK's predominant White group. 'Black' is an inclusive term that refers to all ethnic groups who experience discrimination because of the colour of their skin (MPA, 2005). Other organisations may adopt different terms such as Black, Asian and Minority Ethnic (BAME).

- ❑ minimal difference between the proportion of BME police officer and PCSO applicants (50.2% vs. 55.1%);
- ❑ proportionately fewer BME police officer recruits than PCSO recruits (20.3% vs. 36.5%); and
- ❑ although overall there were fewer PCSOs than police officers recruited during the time period, there were a higher number of Pakistani, Black British, Black African, Bangladeshi, Greek/Greek Cypriot and Mixed White/Black African PCSOs than police officers recruited.

Motivations for becoming a PCSO

Attractions to the PCSO role, as identified by PCSO interviewees, stakeholders and members of the Safer London Panel, were categorised into three themes: the nature of the role itself; future opportunities the role may present; and the terms and conditions of the role. Reasons for why people apply for the PCSO role are presented under each theme below.

1. The nature of the role itself

- ❑ The role is perceived to be less confrontational than the police officer role (stakeholder interviewees);
- ❑ family and friends of applicants are less likely to have come into conflict with or associate negative history with PCSOs than police officers (stakeholder interviewees);
- ❑ viewed as an opportunity to work with the community (PCSO interviewees – particularly older respondents or those of Black African origin);
- ❑ perception that the MPS particularly welcomed PCSO applicants from BME communities (PCSO interviewees – particularly those of Black African origin); and
- ❑ an interest in policing related work (PCSO interviewees).

An older female Black British respondent stated that she wanted to be a PCSO to 'build bridges' between the police and the Black community.

An older female Black African respondent thought that by becoming a PCSO she would help to make the police more approachable for people from her ethnic group.

2. Future opportunities the role may present

- ❑ Half of all PCSOs interviewed viewed the role as a 'stepping-stone' to becoming a police officer (particularly males and those aged 18-25 years); and
- ❑ some interviewees also viewed the role as an opportunity to 'test the water' – to find out what working for the MPS would be like and to make a more informed choice about becoming a police officer.

Interviews with Black British and Black African PCSOs gave a sense that joining the MPS as a police officer was a 'big deal' in their community and that their peers would be more understanding to those who wanted to be a PCSO.

3. Terms and conditions of the role

- ❑ Salary attached to the role, particularly perhaps for applicants with a lower level of education (stakeholder and PCSO interviewees); and
- ❑ flexibility of the PCSO role (stakeholder and PCSO interviewees).

Reasons why PCSOs go on to become police officers rather than applying from the outset

Of all PCSOs that left the role there was a lower proportion from BME communities than the proportion of BME PCSOs in the overall workforce. However the proportion of PCSO leavers from BME communities who left to become police officers was higher than the proportion of BME police officer recruits from the outset. This may suggest that the PCSO role is contributing to diversifying the police officer recruitment profile.

The most common reason why PCSOs left the role was to become a police officer (mostly those aged 21-30 years). However, analysis by ethnicity showed differences between ethnic groups:

- ❑ the most common reason why Bangladeshi, Greek/Greek Cypriot, White British/Irish/Other PCSOs left the role was to become a police officer; and
- ❑ the most common reason why Black African/British/Caribbean, Indian and Pakistani PCSOs left the role was voluntary resignation.

PCSO interviewees were asked if they wanted to become a police officer:

- ❑ more than half of interviewees mentioned they had intended to apply to become a police officer after being a PCSO for a while;
- ❑ some interviewees had originally applied to be a police officer but were unsuccessful or had decided not to pursue their application;
- ❑ reasons why interviewees did not apply to be a police officer at the time they applied to be a PCSO included that they had wanted to gain some policing experience or that the long wait for a training place at Hendon put them off;
- ❑ fewer interviewees still wanted to be a police officer having been a PCSO for a while (than at the time they applied to be a PCSO);
- ❑ those that still wanted to apply to be a police officer after being a PCSO for a while cited limited options for promotion and a lack of respect for the PCSO role, in addition to their initial reasons for wanting to apply; and
- ❑ of those interviewees who were not interested in becoming a police officer, the most common reason for this was because they felt they were too old.

One young male Pakistani interviewee had joined at the age of 18 and stated that he “wasn’t going to serve 30 years as a PCSO!”

A young male Bangladeshi interviewee mentioned that despite always wanting to be a police officer, he now felt that the extra few thousand pounds in salary was insufficient for the amount of paperwork and unsociable hours associated with the role

Reasons for more diversity amongst PCSO compared to police officer recruits

This study identified three overarching reasons for more diversity amongst PCSO compared to police officer recruits: the community focused nature of the role; the opportunity the role offers to increase understanding of working for the MPS; and the alternative option that the role provides for unsuccessful police officer applicants. Key points identified in relation to these overarching reasons are presented below.

1. Community focused nature of the role

- The opportunity to work with the community without the more confrontational and dangerous parts of policing may attract a more diverse recruit profile; and
- Black and older PCSOs interviewed particularly highlighted the opportunity the role offered to work with their *own* community.

One male Black African respondent thought the role would involve liaising with the community to avoid a ‘combat zone’ and resolving issues by encouraging communication between the police and community.

2. To increase understanding of working for the MPS

- Some PCSOs interviewed were using the role to ‘test the water’ - to find out what it would be like working for the MPS before applying to become a police officer;
- negative perceptions of the MPS, pressure from family and friends not to join and the stigma attached to the police officer role were cited as reasons that may deter people from applying to be a police officer and choosing to become a PCSO first; and
- the role was also viewed as an opportunity to gain competencies and experience to support a future police officer application.

There was a sense amongst responses of some Black African and Black British interviewees that they wanted to ‘make a difference’ but were concerned about how their ethnicity would affect the reception they received from their fellow officers and the community. Joining as a PCSO was an opportunity to ‘test the water’.

One Black British respondent stated that the Black community may feel that Black police officers have 'sold out', but is more understanding of those who become PCSOs.

3. An alternative option to the police officer role

Over a quarter of PCSO interviewees who wanted to be a police officer at the time of applying to be a PCSO had originally applied to be a police officer but were not successful or did not proceed with their application.

The role appears to offer an alternative option for unsuccessful police officer applicants who, prior to the introduction of PCSOs, may not have been able to pursue a career with the MPS. This has potential benefits for both the organisation, by retaining a person who has expressed an interest in policing, and the individual, who gains experience to assist them in any future police officer application.

Although there is little difference between the diversity of PCSO and police officer applicants, recruit data suggests greater diversity amongst PCSO than police officer recruits. Therefore, PCSO recruits may consist of PCSO applicants and some unsuccessful police officer applicants, capturing the diversity of both applicant pools.

In addition, some interviewees stated that seeing other underrepresented groups in the PCSO role encouraged them to apply, suggesting that visible diversity is, in itself, an attractor to potential applicants from minority communities.

Moving forward – increasing diversity in the MPS

The PCSO role is currently developing in a variety of ways (e.g. recruitment, training and powers⁶) and this offers a number of opportunities to ensure that the right people are recruited and retained. The development of the PCSO role and processes surrounding it may also highlight opportunities to further diversify the profile of police officer recruits.

1. Retaining current PCSOs

The study indicated that some PCSOs leave the role in search of opportunities for promotion, to specialise in certain areas and to gain more powers and respect, which they perceive the police officer role offers. Rather than advising PCSOs seeking new challenges to consider applying to be a police officer, stakeholders felt more could be done to **address the career structure within the PCSO role**. Developments to the role could take the

⁶ For further information on the extension of PCSO powers see Schedule 9 of the Serious Organised Crime and Police Act 2005 at www.opsi.gov.uk/ACTS/acts2005/50015-ad.htm#sch9 and Part 1, Section 7, 8 and 9 and Schedule 5 of the Police and Justice Act 2006 at www.opsi.gov.uk/acts/acts2006/20060048.htm.

form of a rank structure⁷. However, this is just one of many ways which may make the role more satisfying⁸.

The PCSOs interviewed as part of this study possessed a range of skills including: in-depth understanding of certain communities or cultures; the ability to speak a number of languages; academic and practical qualifications; and a variety of work and voluntary experience. Although some PCSOs gave examples of how they had used their experience and knowledge at work, in general it appeared that their **skills could be better utilised**.

Identifying skills, encouraging opportunities for their use and perhaps providing avenues for promotion and specialisation have the potential to offer both **individual and organisational benefits**, increasing job satisfaction, improving accessibility and service offered by the MPS and retaining motivated, enthusiastic PCSOs in the role for longer.

2. Diversifying police officer recruits

The success of the PCSO role in diversifying the recruitment profile of the MPS as a whole should not replace ongoing efforts to increase diversity of police officer recruits from the outset.

Interviews with PCSOs highlighted how it was often the police officer role, rather than the MPS as a whole, that was viewed in negative terms. It may be useful to consider further ways to **positively promote and portray the police officer role**.

Interviewees highlighted a number of perceptions, not necessarily accurate, which they felt might deter potential police officer applicants. These included:

- ❑ higher standards of education/qualifications required;
- ❑ concern that cultural practices (e.g. prayer, fasting) may not be accommodated;
- ❑ residential nature of the training course which may be inaccessible for certain people; and
- ❑ training methods (e.g. largely classroom based), which may not suit people from all communities.

The MPA/MPS may wish to further **communicate and clarify policies** surrounding these issues.

In addition, consideration could be given to **providing more assistance to those PCSOs who want to go on to become police officers**. Some interviewees felt they would benefit from extra support to build upon their existing skills and develop those required for a transition to the police officer role (e.g. a structured development programme of shadowing or mentoring

⁷ Members of the MPA HR Committee discussed the merits of introducing ranks for PCSOs but did not favour such a development.

⁸ See Sweeney (2006) for a more detailed discussion of possible career pathways for PCSOs.

opportunities with a police officer colleague). Some interviewees felt that a more condensed police officer application and training process should be considered, acknowledging their PCSO application, training and experience.

This study has discussed reasons why the PCSO role has been more successful than the police officer role in recruiting a more representative workforce. However, effective policing of diverse communities is not just about recruiting a diverse workforce⁹. Ensuring that diversity is embedded beyond recruitment together with improving opportunities to retain PCSOs and further diversify the profile of police officer recruits will continue to develop a police service that truly reflects London.

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⁹ See Bellos (2004).

Further information on PCSOs is available at:

www.police.homeoffice.gov.uk/community-policing/community-support-officers/community-cso-faq/ (General information & FAQs about PCSOs)

www.metpolicecareers.co.uk/default.asp?action=article&ID=41 (Details of the PCSO application and selection process)

www.opsi.gov.uk/acts/acts2002/20020030.htm (Original PCSO powers as set out in the Police Reform Act 2002, Schedule 4, Part 1)

www.opsi.gov.uk/ACTS/acts2005/50015-ad.htm#sch9 (Extension of PCSO powers as set out in Serious Organised Crime and Police Reform Act 2005, Schedule 9)

www.opsi.gov.uk/acts/acts2006/20060048.htm (Additional PCSO powers as set out in the Police and Justice Act 2006, Part 1, Section 7, 8 and 9 and Schedule 5)