



Volunteering within the Police

Experiences of Special Constables and Police Support Volunteers

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A report for Lancashire Constabulary

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August 2016

This project was funded by **Lancashire Constabulary** as part of its Citizens in Policing Programme. The research was conducted by Professor Andrew Millie with the assistance of four Lancashire Constabulary Police Support Volunteers. Twenty-five interviews were conducted with various Police Support Volunteers and members of the Special Constabulary. Professor Millie is very grateful for the time and dedication of the volunteers who conducted the majority of the interviews, as well as those who were interviewed. At Lancashire Constabulary thanks are due to ACC Mark Bates, Superintendent Ian Dawson, Nikki Walmsley and Michelle McManus.

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1 Introduction

Background

Whilst the majority of British policing is carried out by paid professionals, there has long been a degree of involvement from volunteers, a situation formalised with the 1831 Special Constables Act (Seth, 1961; Gill and Mawby, 1990; Bullock, 2014; 2015a). Special Constables have full police powers and wear a uniform similar to regular police officers, but are usually unpaid. These Specials have traditionally been a reserve to fall back on, but today fulfil a range of roles and duties.

Other police volunteers contribute to what has become known as an 'extended policing family' or a form of 'civilian policing' (Crawford and Lister, 2004). For example, volunteers can include those involved in various Neighbourhood and Home Watch Schemes. From the early 1990s across England and Wales, volunteers started to appear in many other areas of police work, including supplementary voluntary patrols supported by the police and volunteers staffing front counters at police stations that were threatened with closure (Crawford and Lister, 2004; Millie, 2012; Unison, 2014; Bullock, 2015b). In the early 2000s West Yorkshire Police, for example, took on volunteers:

...to undertake specific duties within police stations, such as providing information on the progress of cases to victims and witnesses, in order to relieve police officers of these duties so that they could spend more time outside the station (Crawford and Lister, 2004: 33).

Those who volunteered for the various opportunities offered by different police services were officially badged 'Police Support Volunteers' (henceforth PSVs). Although the first PSV scheme is thought to have been established in 1992 (Bullock, 2014), the Home Office actively promoted PSVs from the early 2000s as part of a police service, "in which the contribution of everyone – officers, police staff and volunteers – is fully recognised and used to the full in the delivery of front line services" (Home Office, 2004: 9). More recently, there has been a governmental drive to promote community participation in what the Conservatives called a 'Big Society', claiming to be "redistributing power from the state to society; from the centre

to local communities, giving people the opportunity to take more control over their lives". (The Conservatives, 2010: 37). This promotion of local solutions came with calls to improve police-community relations. It also coincided with austerity measures, meaning budget cuts were being made to public services, including the police (Millie and Bullock, 2012; Millie, 2013).

The result was a climate where the active recruitment of unpaid police volunteers became more appealing. While some forces have regarded PSVs as a free resource (Unison, 2014), this is clearly not the case. There are costs involved in recruitment, training, supervision and management, as well as in providing desk space, equipment, insurance and in covering appropriate expenses (Brudney, 1999). Having said that, a PSV is always going to be cheaper than a paid member of police staff or an officer. There has been concern that volunteers have replaced paid employees. However, in Lancashire - the force where the current study occurs – all PSV duties are required to have union approval as *additional* to existing paid roles before being advertised.

Across England and Wales PSVs and Police Specials come under the umbrella of "Citizens in Policing". With various Special Constabularies, Police Cadets, PSVs, and Neighbourhood and Home Watch Schemes it is claimed that there are over 500,000 volunteers working for the police across England and Wales (College of Policing, undated)¹.

The focus for this study is those who volunteer for Lancashire Constabulary as either Special Constables or PSVs. The main difference between Specials and PSVs is that PSVs are unwarranted and usually non-uniformed – although some forces have given uniforms to public-facing PSVs to make them appear more professional (Bullock, 2014).

Aims of the study

Volunteering in policing is an example of social action, of trying to encourage more active participation in society (Putnam, 1995). Volunteers are also a resource to improve police responses to crime and improve community engagement. If used effectively, volunteers can add considerable value to the knowledge and skills

¹ See also Lancashire Constabulary and Lancashire Police and Crime Commissioner (2012)

available to police managers. Yet volunteers are an under-researched aspect of modern policing (e.g. Millie and Jacobson, 2002; Gravelle and Rogers, 2009; Bullock, 2015b). The mainstreaming of the voluntary sector across public services has resulted in differentiation of provision, but we possess incomplete understanding of its character, potential and impact. Greater understanding of the motivations and experiences of volunteers will have important benefits for police managers and ultimately for the governance of policing. The lack of research poses a range of issues for the police's understanding of volunteers, and of making the most of volunteers' contributions. Whilst volunteering has long been a feature of the police service, these issues take on new significance in the context of a contracting state.

As noted, the focus for this study is those who volunteer for Lancashire Constabulary as either Special Constables or PSVs. The aims of the study are to investigate:

- The factors that inhibit or facilitate the participation of volunteers within the police;
- Wide ranging matters related to the recruitment, management and supervision of volunteers within the police; and
- Factors which might inhibit or reinforce the operation of and outcomes associated with volunteering within the policing context.

Methods

This report presents the results of a qualitative study of Special Constables' and PSVs' experiences, skills and values. The project adopted a form of Participatory Action Research (PAR) which, according to Kindon et al. (2007: 1), "involves researchers and participants working together to examine a problematic situation or action to change it for the better". The approach challenges the divide between researcher and those being researched (Wadsworth, 1998); and for this project the aim was to actively involve police volunteers in taking a lead role in the co-production and use of knowledge. The project centred on 25 semi-structured interviews with police volunteers that took place between February and April 2016. Those interviewed included 9 Special Constables and 16 PSVs. Six of the interviews were conducted by the project lead, while the remaining 19 were conducted by police

volunteers themselves. The project adhered to the British Society of Criminology code of ethics and received ethical approval from Edge Hill University.

The role of volunteer interviewer was internally advertised among Lancashire Constabulary volunteers and four of the PSVs recruited conducted further interviews with other police volunteers. The four volunteer interviewers were initially interviewed by the project lead and received training in interview techniques, research ethics and analysis.

The interviews took a maximum of one hour each. Twenty-four interviews were recorded and then transcribed, whilst detailed notes were made of the twenty-fifth. Analysis was conducted by the project lead informed by a further meeting with three of the volunteer interviewers to discuss the interview process and initial findings. The findings from the study were then brought together with analysis of relevant documentation, including pre-existing internal surveys of PSVs conducted by Lancashire Constabulary (2010; 2014) and current force statistics on volunteering. The aim was to produce evidence to inform evidence-based practice.

Structure of the report

The rest of the report is structure by four themes. Firstly who becomes a police volunteer is considered. Next the experiences of being a police volunteer is looked at, followed by the roles of volunteers as compared to the roles volunteers perceive the regular police to have. Finally, the study's findings are brought together in the conclusions with key findings listed.

2 Who becomes a police volunteer?

Who volunteers?

Volunteers make a significant contribution to the work of Lancashire Constabulary. According to Force figures, as of July 2016 there were 502 Special Constables volunteering for the Constabulary. During July 2016 these contributed on average 21.6 hours each, a total of 10,842 hours. For the same month there were 313 PSVs across the Constabulary, who volunteered an average of 2.8 hours each, a total of 879 hours for July. A further 73 were in the process of becoming volunteers. There were also 350 Police Cadets, plus 142 in the process of joining the Cadets.

More detailed data were available for the 313 PSVs, 57 percent of whom were female and 43 percent male. This compared to the 2011 Census figures for Lancashire of 51 percent female and 49 Percent male². The age breakdown of PSVs was also similar to the Census figures, although the age group 25-50 was slightly under represented (see Table 2.1).

Table 2.1. Age Breakdown: Lancashire Constabulary PSVs compared to 2011 Census Age 18+

July 2016 Lancashire Constabulary PSVs %		2011 Census Lancashire %	
Age 18-24	17	Age 18-24	12
Age 25-50	32	Age 25-49	41
Age 51-65	23	Age 50-64	24
Age 66+	28	Age 65+	23
Total	100	Total	100
N=	298	N=	927,770

* Note: The age categories used for Lancashire Constabulary and for the Census are slightly different

The ethnic breakdown of PSVs is shown in Table 2.2, compared to the Census breakdown for Lancashire. Whilst the vast majority of volunteers are White British, this was to be expected in a County dominated by White British residents. There was perhaps a slight under representation of Pakistani and Indian volunteers, but there were more than expected Chinese volunteers.

² 2011 Census data from www.nomisweb.co.uk

Table 2.2. Ethnic Breakdown: Lancashire Constabulary PSVs compared to 2011 Census all ages

	July 2016 Lancashire Constabulary PSVs %	2011 Census Lancashire County %
White British	84	90
Other White	5	3
Asian/Asian British: Indian	1	2
Asian/Asian British: Pakistani	2	3
Asian/Asian British: Bangladeshi	0	<1
Asian/Asian British: Chinese	4	<1
Asian/Asian British: Other	<1	<1
Black/African/Caribbean/Black British	1*	<1
Mixed/multiple ethnic group	0	1
Other ethnic group	1	<1
Not known	1	<1
N=	313	1,171,339

* Including volunteers classified by Lancashire Constabulary as 'White and Black Caribbean'

In summary, those attracted to volunteering with Lancashire Constabulary come from all age groups, slightly more females than males, but largely reflecting the ethnic breakdown of the county.

In terms of the 25 volunteers interviewed for the study, their breakdown in terms of age, gender, ethnicity and personal beliefs is detailed in Table 2.3 below. Those interviewed were an opportunistic sample and they were therefore not necessarily reflective of all volunteers. That said, the PSVs interviewed were an older group than the Specials, which perhaps reflected both volunteering opportunities for PSVs and the profile of Specials, with a proportion joining in order to gain experience before applying to become a regular.

Table 2.3. Number of Interviewees by age, gender, ethnicity and personal belief

	PSVs	Specials	All		PSVs	Specials	All
Age 18-24	0	4	4	White British	13	9	22
Age 25-49	4	3	7	British Pakistani	2	0	2
Age 50-64	3	2	5	Chinese	1	0	1
Age 65+	9	0	9	Total	16	9	25
Total	16	9	25				
					PSVs	Specials	All
male	9	8	17	No religion	4	5	9
female	7	1	8	Christian	10	4	14
Total	16	9	25	Muslim	2	0	2
				Total	16	9	25

Police volunteers' skills and experience

The 25 volunteers interviewed had a range of experience volunteering with the police, from just three months though to one participant who had been a Special for 36 years and another who had been a Special and then a PSV for a remarkable 44 years. There is a wealth of experience among some of these volunteers that should not be underestimated. Five interviewees had more than 10 years' experience volunteering for the police. A further eight had 1-5 years' experience, and six had less than 12 months' experience volunteering.

Prior to the current study, internal questionnaire surveys of Lancashire Constabulary's volunteers had been conducted in order to gain insight into volunteer skills and experiences. I cannot comment on the methodology adopted, and these surveys were not representative; however they hinted at some of the areas explored in the current study. One such survey was of 49 PSVs, conducted in Southern Division in 2010. Whilst the majority of these felt that their current volunteering made best use of their skills and abilities, six of the 49 felt that they needed more training, their skills were not being used to the full, or they could take on more responsibility. The type of skills the volunteers possessed, but were not being utilised, included IT skills, interpersonal skills and driving. Three stated that they had previous police experience that could be utilised better. In 2014 a further survey was conducted, but this time across the whole force gaining responses from 88 PSVs. These volunteers had a range of one to eleven years' experience of volunteering for the police. In the 2014 survey 49 per cent (43/88) stating that the Constabulary did not make best use of their skills. One participant in this survey commented that "No one has ever taken time to find out what additional skills I have". Another queried why there was not a list of jobs that volunteers can do.

Since then the force has introduced a list of volunteer vacancies on its website, a development appreciated by the volunteers in the current study; that said, making the best use of volunteers' skills and experience was still an issue. For instance, one of the PSV respondents to the current study commented that:

initially they don't do enough of skills analysis of individuals, to find out what you can and can't do, and as a result, I've found that they were trying to put

square pegs in round holes, instead of sitting down and asking people what you can do (PSV3).

The volunteer respondents to the current study stated that they enjoyed applying the skills that they have to a policing setting. For instance, PSV3 also commented that, "I'm looking for challenges; I'm looking for work that complements my skills". However, an interesting finding is that some volunteers enjoy doing something that is completely different to their day job and gives them entirely new experiences. According to PSV4, he enjoys, "putting my people skills into perspective, perhaps building up new skills ... it's actually nice to use a completely different skillset". For PSV1, she was looking for something different post-retirement: "I needed something which would utilise your brain, but also perhaps looking for something different than perhaps I'd done before". Special9 also wanted to do something different to the 'day job':

I work in IT security in my day job which is very desk focused, and I looked upon the volunteering side of it as a way of getting out from behind my desk and getting out and meeting people. So it was kind of a way of meeting people I suppose.

The Force might want to make the best use of this volunteer's skills with IT security; yet the volunteer's desire to do something quite different also needs to be considered. A further example was provided by PSV10:

Originally she [the volunteer manager] offered for me to work with young cadets because she said I was more of a leader. ... I thought well no because I work with youngsters and adults all the time, I want to try something else. So I thought well let me go into Road Watch because that's a new experience for me. And we are talking ten years back I had a really bad road traffic accident. I remember from that time I had lots of help and support, and I think I probably made my mind up that I wanted to help and I want to give back.

For this volunteer it was personal experience that led her to want to work with the Community Road Watch. Whilst volunteers would be interested in a more concerted skills mapping when they initially volunteered, it needs to be appreciated that some want to do something completely different to what they have done before, and that they may have particular motivations for this.

Police volunteers' values

Whilst it is useful to know about the skills the volunteers bring with them to the police, it is also helpful to know more about the kind of people that choose to volunteer. In an interview setting it may not be possible to get a detailed picture, but, at the very least, we can gain insight into the kind of people volunteers aspire to be. To this end all volunteers were asked about their personal values. Some respondents struggled with this question, but all were able to highlight what they regarded as important values or ways of viewing the world.

A popular theme was what is known as the golden rule. This is rooted in a number of cultures and religions, but perhaps most famously in the Biblical instruction to “do to others what you would have them do to you”³; or as PSV12 put it, “I treat people, hopefully, as they would treat me” (PSV12). This was alternatively expressed as “do unto others as you’d like them to do to you” (PSV2) and “I treat people how I’d like to be treated myself” (Special17). It is a philosophy for living that can also have an impact on the workplace; and the golden rule has potential for impact on policing more generally. In short, if the police want to be respected, then they must show respect to others (Millie, 2016). The theme of respect was picked up by the volunteers, alongside integrity and honesty. For the volunteers this was taken further in emphasising a need to “accept people for what they are” (PSV1), and that “everyone should be treated the same” (Special14). According to one Special:

... you should treat everybody with the respect that they deserve, you know, dealing with people that you deal with as a volunteer ... It’s not for me to judge them ... they can be horrible, nasty, rude, obnoxious, wanting to fight you kind of people, but you know I just deal with them in a way that’s like, “Well I’ll be kind to you even if you’re being aggressive to me. If you want to carry on being aggressive, that’s fine, but you’re not going to make me into something that I’m not because you want to fight me” (Special18).

The volunteers also highlighted the importance of family, of needing good character, being non-judgemental, trying to help each other, doing the right thing, decency, kindness, giving people a voice, supporting others, accepting people and giving something back; as Special11 put it:

³ Matthew 7:12 New International Version

I always feel like I need to give something back. I know everyone says that, but that's just how I feel. People have helped me so I need to help them.

Why volunteer for the police?

It is useful for managers of police volunteers to remember that many of those who volunteer are there to give something back and want to make a positive contribution. There are of course other motivations and these are considered next. Many young applicants volunteer for the Specials for instrumental reasons in that they see it as a way of getting into the regular police. For instance, according to Special20:

What motivates me is I want to be a regular, I want to join the police service. Specials was definitely a good way in, good insight, a kind of a taster to see if actually I'd enjoy the police.

Similarly, for Special11, becoming a Special while she is a university student made sense: "I hope to join the regulars when I've graduated. But if not I appreciate the fact that [the] Specials is basically a, kind of like, 'CV booster'".

At the other end of the age spectrum there are a number of people who volunteer post-retirement and have quite different motivations, often centred on finding something useful to do; as PSV12 put it, "I can't sit at home and do nothing". According to Special9, "I was looking for some volunteer work to do, I'd had a look at a few different things ... I thought that helping the police out would be probably a pretty unique type of volunteer work". Others had different motivations. For one Chinese volunteer who helped with a foreign language phone line it was an opportunity to help the Chinese community. For another PSV it was an opportunity to do something worthwhile, "I had retired and I wanted to do something that felt worthwhile in the community." (PSV16).

3 The experience of being a police volunteer

What do volunteers do?

The Police Specials interviewed ranged from a newly recruited Special Constable through to a Chief Inspector. As for the PSVs, their roles were diverse, with many taking on more than one role. Across England and Wales, PSVs are engaged in community engagement, corporate communications, custody visiting, emergency planning, customer services, events and licensing, vehicle maintenance, occupational health, victim support, managing Neighbourhood Watch and Farm Watch Schemes, staffing front counters, administering victim satisfaction surveys, monitoring CCTV and Automatic Number Plate Recognition (ANPR) systems, filing and administration, research, and in uniform representing the force at community events (Unison, 2014; Bullock, 2015b). The roles adopted by the 16 PSVs that were interviewed were as follows:

- Police Complaints Resolution Facilitator
- Police Cadet leadership
- Community Road Watch
- Administration
- Early Action Support
- Restorative justice
- Foreign language hotline
- Writing a neighbourhood newsletter
- Audit work
- Role play for new recruits
- Crime trend analysis
- Survey research
- Secretary of police sports and social club
- Work with vulnerable victims of crime
- Independent Custody Visitor
- Independent Advisory Group member
- Independent Training Advisory Panel member
- Independent Animal Welfare lay visitor
- Neighbourhood Policing Team support

Across Lancashire Constabulary there are further PSV opportunities in CCTV, quality assurance, victim liaison, community engagement, chaplaincy work, schools crime prevention work and in being a rural mounted volunteer. There are plainly a lot of volunteering opportunities and these are clearly advertised on the Force website, a development appreciated by PSV3; that recruitment is “much more structured now, and much better for that, because you’ve now got the tasks on the website”.

What is it like being a police volunteer?

The 25 interviewees were all asked how easy or difficult it was to become a volunteer with the police. The majority of PSVs found it a fairly straightforward. Some found the vetting process tricky and a bit slow; although, as one volunteer highlighted, “... I think it coincided with the Lancashire constabulary bobbies recruitment drive” (PSV4). There was some frustration that under such circumstances the volunteers went to the back of the queue. One of the Specials found the application form difficult, although another found the process straightforward: “A lot of my friends said it was difficult to become a special because they’re on the third, fourth try of getting through the application stage, but I got through the first time” (Special14).

Once past the application stage, all the volunteers had positive things to say about the experience of being a police volunteer. Common comments were that it is enjoyable, a good experience, interesting, fun, exciting, and that they feel useful. For instance, according to PSV5, “it’s really very interesting because it’s a totally new area for me”. For one of the Specials interviewed, “I really enjoy it, it’s volunteer work like nothing else” (Special9). For Special20, “probably the easiest way to describe it is you don’t really feel like a volunteer, you know, you’re definitely welcomed”. Another PSV found it, “really interesting; it gives me another avenue to pursue, potentially, for a career” (PSV24). Behind this there were some issues identified, but the headline experience was broadly positive.

There were a range of factors that contributed to the volunteers’ enjoyment of working for the police. For PSV25, at age 70 it was the fact that it made her feel useful. For Special9 it was working “in a very good team”. According to PSV24:

I just love meeting new people. I love getting involved in different things. I just find it really fascinating that there's different diverse elements to the volunteering. ... I get a sense of pride out of it. You know, if someone asks me, 'what do I do?' I love telling people what I do.

For Special17, he had always wanted to join the police, so becoming a Special was a way into the Force. One PSV enjoyed the flexibility of volunteering (PSV11), while another who works with the Police Cadets enjoyed seeing improvements with the young people (PSV15). Not everyone enjoyed their volunteering, but they could see the benefits of what they did. For instance, when PSV2 was asked if he enjoyed doing Road Watch, his answer was:

Not particularly ... [but] it keeps the speeds down, and it reduces, hopefully, the death off the road (PSV2).

That said, the story is more positive than negative. For Special17, "it's something I've always wanted to do ... even though it's voluntary it's sort of, I don't know, it gives me a sense of pride being able to do it." According to PSV3, "I get a lot of satisfaction from it, inasmuch as I feel very much appreciated; I'm challenged in what I do."

What would volunteers change?

The story so far is broadly positive; yet there are a few areas for improvement that, if not addressed, could impact on the volunteer experience and may cause some to leave. One respondent to the earlier 2014 survey stated that "...over the past 12 months, I have had a sense of isolation I don't feel part of a team". Judging by the comments made in the current research, this may be less of a problem now – although it is something to watch for. In the 2014 survey some volunteers felt under-used and frustrated at not being given suitable work; as one respondent to the 2014 survey noted, "I feel under-used. All I can say is 'Use it or lose it'". This is still a concern for some volunteers today; as PSV23 noted regarding voluntary Police Complaints Resolution, "it's very interesting [but] it's a bit intermittent". Also regarding Police Complaints Resolution, according to PSV19:

I get on very well with the other volunteers ... although they are dwindling in numbers, because of the lack of allocation of casework, I think people are

drifting away. So that team of 20 originally went down to about 12 pretty quickly, and now I think it's down to probably half a dozen (PSV19).

This may be more of an issue for this particular strand of volunteering, yet giving volunteers enough to do is key to maintaining enthusiasm; as is keeping them informed. Another PSV working with Police Complaints commented that: "the main thing we've found is that we're not kept up to date with events relating to these complainants. So, we end up sort of having to contact people to say, 'Has anything happened...?'" (PSV1) Being kept informed was also an issue for one PSV working with the restorative justice scheme. For PSV16, "I enjoy doing the course, the RJ course, I was all buoyed up for it then, as I say, some staff through sickness or whatever, they left and you lose the momentum. I'm still keen to be involved, but you do need to be kept informed." Keeping volunteers informed is a basic requirement for volunteer retention and management.

Another frustration for one PSV was the speed of expenses claims. According to PSV2, "I'm not stuck for money ... but they never, ever pay expenses on time". Another PSV wanted more contact with other volunteers, "I hardly ever see anybody, you know. I sometimes think it would be nice to sit in the canteen when I go in with another volunteer, but never happens" (PSV8). This volunteer missed the various volunteer forums and socials that had occurred in the past.

The concerns of the Police Specials were different. The training was praised, although for Special11, "I feel like it was kind of maybe rushed a little bit". Another Special was concerned with the Force's focus on using Specials as a training ground for prospective applicants to the regular police:

Instead of being cheap labour until they join as regulars, they could look at what the police call career specials, which are people like me really that have no intention of joining, and using us better (Special22).

This Special had been volunteering for the Force for six years, enjoyed being a Special, but did not wish to join the regulars. The use of the Specials as a gateway to the Force was also seen as an issue in terms of the changing age profile of the Specials and the impact this might have on training. According to Special9:

we seem to have a large number of very, very young specials who typically are students. ... I don't know whether it's a case of only training you to do something that they would trust an 18 year old student to do, but we do have limitations on what we're trained, we're only trained to a basic driving standard. That limits how we can be deployed.

Volunteers' views on their supervision

In the earlier 2014 survey, a lack of supervision was identified as a concern. Typical comments included "I didn't even know I had a supervisor", or "I have very rarely had any contact with a supervisor". In the current study, this was still a concern for some volunteers. For instance PSV8 described his Community Beat Manager as a "lovely man, you know, a really nice chap"; however, he went on to say that "it would be nice to have a meeting with him, you know. We did say that we'd start having meetings but they never really, they never really took off". According to Special11, "To be honest, I don't feel like I'm supervised. I feel like they kind of like throw you in at the deep end a little bit". Similarly for PSV16, "Without being negative, there's no supervision". However, such comments about supervision were the minority. The majority of volunteers in the study had only good things to say about their supervision. For Special22, "I find these days the immediate supervisors, the sergeants, are almost all brilliant". Similarly, for Special18, "I can't think of a single person in our station, whether it's a supervisor or a bobby who won't bend over backwards to help us". According to PSV4, "Early action is very well supervised, in the sense that the person who leads it is easily contactable". For PSV2, "if you're stuck, they'll help you with anything. As will any police officer – I mean, I just call into the canteen". The willingness of others to step in and help the volunteers was a common theme, as PSV15 put it, "Everybody seems to pull together". Similarly, according to PSV23, "everybody cares – you send an email, you get a response straight away." This volunteer did have some reservations: "The only negative is the lack of feedback. You would expect to get feedback sooner. ... It's a really good team to work for, but you do feel a little bit left out of it". Supervision may be good, but as already noted, keeping volunteers informed is a basic requirement.

Relations with other volunteers and with regulars

Volunteers' relations with others were explored further with specific questions on how they got on with other volunteers and with regulars. Some volunteers had very little contact with regular police officers, while some worked exclusively with regulars and saw very few other volunteers. That said, when volunteers work with others in the police they generally have good relations. One respondent to the earlier 2014 survey stated that they "definitely do not feel valued these days". This does not appear to be the case for most volunteers today. For instance, according to PSV10, regular officers, "will always be thankful and appreciative of the work we do. And it is good to hear that from them". For PSV12, working with the regulars is a pleasure; "I'm always welcomed. I don't feel intimidated whatsoever". According to PSV8, "Oh, can't fault it, you know they are excellent, you know, whatever rank. I have never had a problem there, they are always very civil, very pleasant". The Specials included in the study also had generally good relations with regular officers. For instance:

you can feel as though you are being more of a burden. ... that's not always how they act ... The Regulars I have worked with have been really nice (Special7).

Similarly, according to Special9, the area where he is based has, "always been very pro-specials". He went further stating that "I know historically specials were seen as overtime thieves but I've certainly not seen anything negative towards specials at all".

As for relations with other volunteers these were also generally good. For PSV21, "we have a laugh, I mean when we're on the Road Watch". PSV16 similarly commented that he has always got on well with other volunteers, and that "we've had a laugh". PSV17 noted that, "where you've got a large group of people together you, I don't know, you get closer to some people than you do to others". This is inevitable. Yet, it seems that most volunteers do get on well with each other. A possible reason for this was given by PSV4:

with regards to the volunteers, we get on great because we're all, like I say, we're all likeminded. The beauty of it is, you come from different backgrounds, different experiences, but you're all also more motivated by the reason for helping the others out.

4 The roles of volunteers and regulars

All volunteers were asked what they considered to be the roles of the police, and more specifically the roles of the police volunteer. The roles of the police are varied, comprising traditional crime fighting and order maintenance, plus a social service function with the police needing to be there to help those in need and to reassure the public (Millie, 2014). Many volunteers were aware of these different aspects to policing. Some focused on the need to “keep law and order” (PSV16) or “to keep the peace more than anything” (PSV2) – or as Special14 put it, “They are there to keep the peace, mainly. Without the police everything would just be hectic”. Yet many volunteers – perhaps due to their experience of being a police volunteer – were also very much aware of the wider social service functions of the police. According to Special6:

Clearly, there’s all the issues around crime and fighting crime, but when you look at the stats, how much police time is spent doing that, and how, these days, are we moving towards becoming almost an emergency social service? A lot of our thinking and planning is around early action teams; the police are only scratching the surface on things like sexual abuse and stuff, you know, there’s a whole minefield out there.

Similarly, Special18 highlighted the importance of safeguarding in the volunteering that he does: “People talk about there’s not as much crime, but a lot of the jobs that I go to, it’s not with crime.” PSV8 listed a range of non-traditional activities that the police are involved in, including sexual exploitation, cybercrime, terrorism, domestic abuse, and dealing with people with mental health issues.

As for the volunteers’ roles within policing, while some of the Special Constables that were interviewed saw their role as the same as regulars, most of the Specials and PSVs saw their job as being supportive of the regulars - after all, ‘support’ is in the title of the PSV. Typical responses were as follows:

...to help save police time, to enable them to do their role (PSV1);

...to assist the Regulars, to serve the people (Special7);

...we certainly can't replace the regular officers ... I think we do a very good job of supporting the police officers and the constabulary (Special9);

... to support and work alongside the staff, work alongside staff and help them to do what they are doing, to support and assist them (PSV10).

This supporting role is clearly important. It was recognised that the various pressures faced by regular officers meant they could not achieve all that communities' demand. This is where volunteers step in. Nonetheless, rather than just having a purely supportive role, secondary to the regular officer, it is possible that the volunteer is of equal importance. Volunteering has been promoted within the police in order to improve legitimacy, to provide a 'bridge' between the regulars and communities, and for the police as an organisation to be more representative of communities (NPIA, 2008; Bullock, 2014). If these aims are real, then perhaps volunteers need to be seen as something more than "an extra pair of hands" (Special20). The role of the volunteer as a 'bridge' between the police and community was highlighted by one young male British Pakistani Muslim who volunteers as a PSV:

... each community you have people that don't like the police and, you know, vice versa. But like I said, our family's never had problems with the police ... but I thought if they could, if some of the people going against the police could say, "Look, ooh, there's an Asian volunteer working for the police" or something like that, ... It's trying to break down barriers, that's what my initial thought was (PSV21).

An important point was made by PSV3 who highlighted that volunteers are quite different to employees and their position as volunteer should be respected:

I always maintain, I don't work for the organisation, I work with the organisation, and there's a very big difference. A volunteer works with you, he doesn't work for you, and that's the difference. If I work for you, you're employing me, and I'm stuck with you. As a volunteer, I work with you, and if I don't like what I get, I'll walk away (PSV3).

Police volunteers and powers

As noted, Special Constables have the same powers as regular officers. PSVs do not have any powers; however, in September 2015 the government consulted on the introduction of powers for some PSVs (Home Office, 2015). All volunteers interviewed as part of this study were asked their view on giving some powers to PSVs. Some were in favour of the introduction of powers. For instance, according to PSV21, “Brilliant. I could do with a few powers.” Similarly, PSV10 commented that, “I’d love to have the appropriate training and I think, yes, I would like to have a bit more power”. Special18 took the view that “It is a good idea as long as it’s regulated properly and it’s understood”. That said, the majority of respondents were less favourable and saw the role of the PSV as something quite different to the warranted officer; as noted by PSV3, “I’d rather see more specials than volunteers [PSVs] taking on that role”. According to PSV5, “I don’t like that idea, no. That’s, I think, you know, some power just belongs to policemen”. PSV2 put it more strongly:

... if they said now, “We’re going to give volunteers all these powers”, that’s me finished tomorrow. Yes. I’m just not interested in anything like that, and I think it’s wrong.

PSV15 thought the introduction of powers would mean all volunteers would need to be re-interviewed, “to see whether they have got the ability to hold that power and utilise it and do it properly”. Some interviewees had issues with the volunteers’ training and personal safety if they were given powers, as summarised by PSV19:

... we haven’t gone through proper recruitment procedures, we haven’t been given proper training, so we’re not fit to assume the responsibilities of police officers, and if that being the case I don’t think we should be given police powers, it wouldn’t be appropriate.

So while there was some in favour of the introduction of powers for volunteers, this was muted enthusiasm. For some, if volunteers are to have powers, then they may as well be Special Constables; PSVs are something different.

5 Conclusions

There are a large number of volunteers across Lancashire Constabulary, but little is known about who they are, the experiences of being a volunteer and the roles volunteers play. This qualitative study was an attempt to fill that gap. Volunteers bring with them a range of experiences and skills. While many are keen to use their skills within the policing setting, an important finding is that some would rather do something completely different to what they have done before. Volunteering is in effect an opportunity to explore new things. This is an important lesson for managers. A skills analysis of new volunteers will be very useful, but managers should appreciate that some volunteers would want to try something different. The values that volunteers believe they bring with them reflect those of people willing to give their time and energy for free. Key values of respect, integrity and honesty were seen as important. In terms of motivation for becoming a police volunteer, there were a range of factors. Many young Specials joined as a route to becoming a regular officer. Post-retirement volunteers were looking for something to do with their time, others were looking for something worthwhile to do, to give something back.

The experience of volunteering was largely positive and PSVs in particular took on a wide range of roles. Volunteering made them feel useful, challenged and appreciated. That said, there were some areas for improvement. Some felt underused or under-informed, a concern for volunteer retention. One noted the slowness of expenses claims. Such seemingly minor issues can become major concerns for those giving their time for free. Most Specials were happy with their experience, although those that were not there as a route into the Regulars did question the focus on the Specials as a training ground.

Volunteers were generally complementary about their supervision, and most had good relations with other volunteers and with regulars. This is especially pleasing given the potential for conflict between paid and unpaid staff. The Force's policy of seeking union approval for new volunteering posts may have lessened such impact.

The volunteers saw the role of the police to be a mix of crime fighting, peace keeping and social service. They saw their own role as being in support of the Regulars, "to enable them to do their role" (PSV1).

This supporting role is important, yet the volunteer could be of equal importance as part of a policy of improving legitimacy, providing a 'bridge' between the regulars and communities, and for the police to be more representative of communities. The volunteers generally saw their role as quite different to the Regulars, and so when asked about PSVs potentially being given powers, most were against the idea.

The main findings of this study are summarised below:

1. Volunteers bring a range of skills that are useful for the police. Many want to use these skills; however, some want to explore volunteering opportunities that are new to them. A skills analysis of new volunteers will be highly useful, but some will want to do something completely different.
2. The motivations for volunteering vary, from wanting to join the Regulars through to just wanting to do something worthwhile. Managers need to be aware of these differences.
3. Most volunteers enjoy their time with the police and get a lot out of it; yet some feel underused or under-informed, a concern for volunteer retention.
4. Volunteers are generally complementary about their supervision and have good relations with other volunteers and with regular officers.
5. Special Constables and PSVs see their role as being in support of regular officers. Whilst this supporting role is important, so too is their role in improving legitimacy, providing a 'bridge' between the regulars and communities, and in making the police more representative of communities.
6. PSVs generally see their role as quite different to the Regulars, and so when asked about PSVs potentially being given powers, most are against the idea.

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