

Role and Function of Police Community Support Officers in West Midlands Police

Report to the West Midlands Police and Crime Panel

Report of West Midlands Police and Crime Commissioner

Purpose

1. The purpose of this paper is to provide information on the role and function of Police Community Support Officers (PCSOs) in West Midlands Police. It will focus on the following areas:
 - A summary of the findings from an internal force review conducted in the autumn of 2012.
 - Information on the statutory and discretionary powers available
 - The potential for advocating the further decriminalisation of certain offences or the granting of additional powers.

Background

2. Introduced by the Police Reform Act 2002, PCSOs were intended to address the disparity between the high public demand for reassurance and the number of regular sworn officers visible to the community on foot patrol.
3. The ACPO position on the role of PCSOs within the police service was adopted by the Chief Constables Council in January 2005. It states:

“The fundamental role of the PCSO is to the policing of neighbourhoods, primarily through highly visible 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 emphasis of this role, and the powers required to fulfil it, will vary from neighbourhood to neighbourhood and force to force.”

4. The legislation enabled chief constables to designate certain powers in line with the context in which they wanted them to operate. In West Midlands Police the designation of powers has been based on the desire to improve trust and confidence and the delivery of neighbourhood policing to every community within the West Midlands. The overarching deployment principles for PCSOs are contained in force policy which states that their function is to:
 - Support delivery of trust and confidence
 - Provide a high visible uniformed presence either on foot or on cycle.
 - Undertake non-confrontational problem solving duties including tackling anti-social behaviour and neighbourhood priorities, in conjunction with community partners.
 - Make a significant contribution to public engagement and influence in their Ward or LPU; inclusive of our diverse and minority communities.
 - Support victims of crime, including secondary crime scene attendance to provide reassurance and community engagement.
 - PCSO shift deployment must reflect the needs of Ward Neighbourhood Policing Teams to maximise community access and visibility (of uniform resources) on the neighbourhood.
 - PCSOs are not deployed as a substitute for a warranted officer capability.
5. There are currently 672 PCSOs in post across the force.

PCSO Review 2012

6. The role and deployment of PCSOs has been subject to review by the force. The latest was conducted in autumn 2012 and was timed following the roll out of the Continuous Improvement Programme (CIP) across the 10 Local Policing Units (LPUs). The CIP involved a systematic approach to improving efficiency and effectiveness of local policing that included changes to the structure and role of neighbourhood teams.
7. The review addressed the following questions:
 - Have there been changes to the role and deployment of PCSOs since the last review? If so what has changed and why?
 - Do the Deployment Principles need updating to reflect any changes in role that have taken place?
 - To fulfil the current Deployment Principles or any proposed changes are there any additional Discretionary Powers required?
 - Identify any further training and development that is required to achieve the role.
8. The review methodology included LPU focus groups and an external survey that was circulated to key members of the community through LPU Key Individual Networks and Independent Advisory Groups. The survey sought to understand the impact PCSOs had on the community and their role in neighbourhood policing.
9. The review reinforced that the primary role of PCSOs is still and should remain as reassurance and engagement. It was found that there had been some change as a result of CIP mainly indicating that PCSOs were now more involved in ASB case management and carried workloads. It is evident that they are now more routinely involved in problem solving, partnership and engagement activities.

10. There was some evidence that PCSOs were on occasions being sent to incidents that moved them away from their core engagement role. The reason for these deployments was due primarily to a lack of awareness of their role by some contact centre staff and supervisors.
11. The view from the majority of the LPUs was that the existing Deployment Principles were still relevant but needed greater visibility across the force to ensure PCSOs were not inappropriately deployed.
12. There was no consistent request for extension of the discretionary powers that the Chief Constable can designate. The only request for an additional power that had support by a number of LPUs was the power to deal with begging.
13. The external online survey had respondents from across the force area. The results indicated that there is strong support for the engagement and visibility role through foot patrol and attendance at community meetings. PCSOs are seen as supporting the delivery of trust and confidence. Nearly 50% of respondents felt they could influence neighbourhood priorities through their PCSOs.
14. PCSOs are marginally more visible in neighbourhoods than police officers with 37% of respondents stating they saw a PCSO most days or several times a week with 46% stating they knew them by name and sight. Talking to the community while on patrol was seen as the most popular and frequent method of contact.
15. There was an open response question that asked about the role played by PCSOs and the powers needed to undertake the role. Where there has been ongoing contact with PCSOs there were many positive comments about the impact they had on reducing crime and ASB and the activities they engage in on the neighbourhoods. Their continuity in neighbourhoods, accessibility and the relationships they develop are clearly appreciated. There was no clear indication that the community wanted an extension of powers, a few responses made mention of the fact that PCSOs might be hindered by having fewer available powers than police officers.
16. The review was presented to the force Command Team in January 2013 with recommendations relating to the granting of the discretionary power to deal with begging; an extension of working hours on a business case basis for LPUs with night time economies who wanted PCSOs to extend hours alongside their neighbourhood teams; making the Deployment Principles more visible and accessible and a proposal around an allocation model similar to that used to build neighbourhood teams.
17. The funding settlement from the Home Office in December 2012 contained an element that was previously the ring fenced grant for PCSOs. This has enabled the Police and Crime Commissioner (PCC) to decide to recruit PCSOs to bring their strength towards the previous establishment.

PCSO Powers

18. Section 38 of the Police Reform Act 2002 provides the authority for a Chief Constable to designate powers to PCSOs as set out in Part 1 of Schedule 4 of the Act. Following consultation by the government a standard list of 20 powers for PCSOs was introduced in the Police and Justice Act 2006.

19. Attached at Appendix A is a list of the standard powers and the discretionary powers available for designation by the Chief Constable. The discretionary powers currently designated in force are highlighted in yellow. The force approach to the designation of powers has been to ensure that PCSOs are focused on their core role of visible patrol and engagement within the framework of neighbourhood policing rather than enforcement. This closely follows ACPO guidance issued in 2007.
20. A review of PCSOs conducted by the NPIA in 2008 found that a majority of powers issued are seldom used, particularly when large numbers of powers are designated.
21. In addition, all West Midlands Police PCSOs have been designated as Traffic wardens to enable them to direct and manage traffic related offences in support of their core role. PCSOs have been trained to deal with unnecessary and wilful obstruction offences relating to vehicles but their use of this power has been infrequent. There are plans to refresh the knowledge of PCSOs to make more frequent use of the Traffic Warden Powers to enable them to respond to community concerns such as reported parking problems.
22. The ability for local authorities to apply for the decriminalisation of parking offences was introduced by the Road Traffic Act 1991. The legislation specifically extends only to parking offences. The further decriminalisation of other road traffic related offences would require further changes to the law. In practical terms the offence still retained by police officers and PCSOs that is most relevant to management of traffic problems is unnecessary and unlawful obstruction. The decriminalisation of this power would remove a valuable tool to deal with road traffic issues and particularly if offending occurred late evening and into the night would constrain the options available to the police.
23. PCSOs have been trained to deal with unnecessary and wilful obstruction offences relating to vehicles. In addition to Traffic Warden powers, PCSOs under the standard powers are able to deal with a range of vehicle related offences that they may encounter in their neighbourhoods. These include powers to issue fixed penalty notices for cycling on a footpath; power to require the name and address for road traffic offences; power to seize vehicles used to cause alarm; and powers to remove abandoned vehicles.
24. From the reviews conducted there has been no clear indication that PCSOs are constrained by the existing powers or that changes in the policing environment necessitate a change to their role.

Future opportunities for the development of the PCSO role

25. The ability of the Chief Constable to designate additional powers to PCSOs is controlled by the provisions of the Police Reform Act. In guidance issued by the National Police Agency in 2005 it was stated that powers falling outside of Schedule 4 of the Act cannot be lawfully designated to PCSOs and requests for new powers will require amendments to the Act.
26. During the review of PCSOs conducted by the force in 2012 contact was made with neighbouring and most similar forces. All the forces contacted deploy PCSOs in line with the ACPO principles and have no significant plans to move their role away from neighbourhood policing.

27. The ACPO lead for PCSOs has confirmed that there are currently no plans to seek an extension of powers and this position has also been stated by ministers. The view is that the core role of PCSOs needs to be preserved. Consideration must also be given to possible legal and financial implications of additional powers. Issues including suitability, training, additional supervision, personal protective equipment and abstractions to court need to be taken into account.
28. The force is currently conducting a pilot in Birmingham South with Cambridge University using an evidenced based experimental methodology to measure the impact of structured patrol in crime and anti-social behaviour hotspots. The pilot is due to run for 12 months to ensure that the results are statistically valid. It is based on a theory of hotspot policing that states PCSOs who are highly visible in these areas for 12 – 16 minutes can cause a reduction in crime as well as calls for service. Although at an early stage the first five months of the pilot are indicating positive results. Combined with the introduction of Automatic Resource Allocation System (ARLS) technology the ability to specifically direct the patrols of PCSOs with an evidenced based methodology provides the potential to shape and measure the impact of their patrol time.
29. With the development of Integrated Offender Management (IOM) in force PCSOs are increasingly being deployed, where appropriate, in support of the management of medium and low risk offenders.
30. The force continues to review the role played by PCSOs alongside their officer colleagues in the delivery of neighbourhood policing and will look for opportunities to innovate to make them more effective.