Understanding the Motivations, Morale, and Retention of Special Constables: Findings from a National Survey

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Abstract Special Constables have an established history within British policing. The Special Constabulary has represented an under-researched aspect of policing, with motivations to join, morale, factors relating to length of service and reasons for leaving being poorly understood. This article draws upon data from a national survey of Special Constables undertaken across all police forces in England and Wales. The analysis illustrates differences in motivations, dependent on age, and length of service, with younger Special Constables viewing the role as a pathway to future paid employment as a Regular police officer. The results contradict perspectives that attribute attrition from the Special Constabulary primarily to changes in personal circumstances for Specials, demonstrating how such changes are less important than satisfaction with the experience of being a Special Constable. The article concludes by identifying the significance of the findings for future policy and practice in respect of the Special Constabulary.

Introduction

Special Constables are unpaid volunteers who, after successful completion of their training, hold the same warranted powers as 'Regular', paid police officers (Caless *et al.*, 2010). While the role has deep historical roots (Gill and Mawby, 1990; Emsley, 1996; Leon, 2017), 'it can be argued that they represent one of the most promising and potentially radical areas of innovation in modern policing' (Britton and Callender, 2017, p. 149). For several decades now, there have been narratives of growth of the Special Constabulary. A national data benchmarking exercise across England and Wales undertaken in 2016 found that 31 of the 43 police forces had growth targets for their Special Constabulary (Britton *et al.*, 2016, p. 23). National strategic projections for Special Constabulary numbers, for example the projection of 24,800 Special Constables by 2015 (HMIC, 2013), sit ambitiously beyond actual numbers of

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Specials (12,931 in September 2017; Home Office, 2018). Beyond growth in numbers, there are also strategic narratives of an expansion of role (Britton and Callender, 2017, pp. 159–161). Whittle (2017, p. 136) argues that 'roles and responsibilities of special constables have changed dramatically since the days when volunteer officers were just expected to turn out in an emergency, police the village fête or direct traffic', and there is a shift towards Special Constables being used more at the 'hard end' of policing (HMIC, 2012; Bullock and Leeney, 2016).

In part, these ambitions for growth, both numerically and in terms of role, are framed in an austerity context (Bullock and Leeney, 2016) with the Special Constabulary being viewed as an 'excellent way of both increasing capacity and reducing demand, thereby providing a better service to the public, especially in a period of austerity' (ACPO, 2013, p. 4). The arguments for an expansion of police voluntarism are much broader, including potential for empowering and engaging communities (Johnston, 2003; Ren *et al.*, 2006; Crawford, 2008; Gravelle and Rogers, 2009; Morgan, 2012; Bullock, 2014a; Dobrin and Wolf, 2016), as a source of new skills and expertise (Britton and Knight, 2016; Britton and Callender, 2017; Caless, 2017), as a means of improving diversity in policing (Bullock, 2014b) and as bringing 'a potential for new ways of thinking and delivering to policing challenges' (Britton and Callender, 2017, p. 160).

In respect of numerical growth of the Special Constabulary, there remain gaps between narratives of growth and the trends in numbers over time. Whilst there have been some periods of upward trending nationally in the numbers of Special Constables in England and Wales, for example in the period before the 2012 Olympic Games there was an increase of some 30% from 15,505 to 20,343 between 2010 and 2012 (Sigurdsson and Dhani, 2010; Dhani, 2012), these increases have not been sustained (Britton, 2018a). The same pattern of unsustained growth surges are also evident at individual force level, where expansions in numbers have tended to be followed by commensurate falls in

numbers in subsequent years' data (Whittle, 2017; Britton, 2018a). Analysis of national police workforce statistics (Britton, 2018a, p. 3) shows there to be a fall in Special Constabulary numbers nationally in every annual change data period since September 2012, including a 15.2% reduction in the data period from September 2016 to September 2017. The past 5-year period of reductions in number have been driven in part not only by a reducing trend in recruitment volumes (Britton, 2017a, p. 5), but also by consistently high rates of attrition from Special Constabularies, with rates of attrition climbing higher over the past five years (Britton, 2017a, p. 7).

High-levels of attrition from Special Constabularies is not a new area of concern and has been the focus for research projects in the past (Mirrlees-Black and Byron, 1994; Alexander, 2000; Gaston and Alexander, 2001; Whittle 2014, 2017). Whittle (2017, p. 137) argues that the tendency has been for forces to focus on recruitment and driving growth, whilst the rate of departures from Special Constabularies has remained poorly understood and untackled, suggesting that 'in most cases where PCCs have driven bold recruitment initiatives, even where they are able to recruit large numbers, forces failed to retain them'. Evidence points to many Specials serving for two years or less (Whittle, 2014; Britton, 2017b), which brings challenges in respect of value for money. Police forces do invest a significant amount of money recruiting, training and equipping volunteer officers, estimated to be around £2,775 per officer (NPIA, 2010). To be cost-effective, forces need to ensure that Specials are serving enough hours to meet this cost, which has been put at £1,224 for the first 2 years and £540 for each subsequent year (NPIA, 2008). Understanding the issue of retention, however, is not only important for police forces in terms of costs and operational effectiveness, but also in seeking to better understand how individual experiences can be enhanced to reflect and acknowledge the contribution

volunteers add to the delivery of public services (Wilson, 2000; Jamison, 2003).

Factors that police forces tend to cite as reasons behind the high recorded rates of Special Constables leaving have included to join the regulars, the updating of records, domestic/work life balance, moving home, and a change of work commitments (Alexander, 2000; NPIA, 2010), suggesting that there may be little that can be done to prevent the rate of loss of Special Constables. Nonetheless, whilst 'involuntary turnover' is prevalent across volunteering domains (Jamison, 2003), it is evident that there are other internal factors which are likely to influence the decisions of Specials to resign, and which forces have control over. These include poor supervision, a lack of training, not feeling valued, uninteresting duties, and not being deployed in a worthwhile manner (Alexander, 2000; Gaston and Alexander, 2001). As such, it would appear that there are steps that forces can take to positively influence Special Constables who are considering leaving.

This article explores the motivations and morale of Special Constables, and in particular focuses on factors related to leaving the Special Constabulary. The survey results illustrate the differing motivations of Specials for joining the Special Constabulary and the key factors which determine their length of service. In so doing, it outlines an alternative rationale for high levels of attrition and offers suggestions for future policy, practice, and investment into the Special Constabulary to extend the career lengths of Specials, improve their experiences, and enhance the value and effectiveness of Special Constabularies.

Method

The first national survey of police volunteers in England and Wales

A national survey of Special Constables across all police forces in England and Wales, the first of its kind, was undertaken by the national Citizens in Policing Community of Practice in late 2015 and early 2016 (Britton and Knight, 2016). The Community of Practice was formed in June 2014 drawing together a range of stakeholders, including the College of Policing, Home Office, Association of Special Constabulary Chief Officers, National Police Chief's Council, Association of Police and Crime Commissioners, and Neighbourhood Watch, alongside leads from police forces and volunteering expertise (Citizens in Policing Community of Practice, 2016). The survey intended to help 'give voice' to those who volunteer in policing, and inform a new national strategy for Citizens in Policing launched in July 2016 (Citizens in Policing Community of Practice, 2016).

The survey was distributed online to Special Constables across each of the 43 police forces in England and Wales and the British Transport Police. Distribution was managed at individual force level, on behalf of the national Community of Practice. With 1,908 responses by Special Constables, the survey represented the largest to date undertaken across the Special Constables of England and Wales, with responses from every police force area.

There were several challenges inherent in undertaking a survey of Special Constables on a national scale. Thus, while the survey results discussed in this article provide a picture of experiences across Special Constables nationally, findings do risk 'averaging out' and over-simplifying a range of locally disparate and variable pictures. This is further complicated by uneven response rates across different forces, which likely reflects a range of factors including poor basic data and system management approaches within police forces, and different approaches to engaging volunteer participants across forces with the survey. Estimating response rates nationally, by individual forces and regionally presents challenges, as available figures for the overall strength of Special Constabularies in forces tend to remain unreliable (Britton et al., 2016, p. 47). Nationally the response rate was estimated at 12%; there was variation from 5% to 30% in

individual force areas, with approximately two-thirds of forces ± 5% of the national response rate figure. There was little or no regional pattern in this variability of response. At force level, there was some limited pattern in the variation in response; with lower response rates in some of the larger urban forces. While no doubt an unevenness of response across forces will have impacted in some ways on the overall nationally averaged picture, the nature of that variation appears to show little by way of systematic pattern. Individual elements of each force local context, approach and management seem to shape response patterns, rather than more structural factors such as force size, rurality, areas of the country, and similar factors.

Despite these challenges, the national survey provides a significant building block in the development of a stronger evidence-base for police volunteering. Moreover, the results of the survey identify key areas for further research and enquiry in terms of gaining a better understanding of the factors shaping levels of attrition within the Special Constabulary.

Analytical procedure

Survey content was designed around seven categories relating to the experience of being a Special Constable: Management and Supervision; Training; Recognition, Appreciation and Fair Treatment; Making a Difference to the Community; Skill Recognition and Development; Flexibility and Individual Need; and Feedback. Respondents were asked to score their agreement with a series of statements relating to their experience of being a member of the Special Constabulary and their level of morale, using a five-point Likert scale (1: Strongly Agree, 2: Agree, 3: Neither Agree or Disagree, 4: Disagree, 5: Strongly Disagree). Afterwards, the individual scores were recoded as follows: 1–2 was recoded as Agree; 3 as neither Agree nor Disagree; and 4–5 as Disagree. Analysis of results was conducted by way of Chi-square testing at the 95% confidence level ($P < 0.05$), with Phi and Cramers V statistics being reported dependent on the number of categories within

Table 1: Demographics

	n (%)
Gender (n = 1,890)	
Female	381 (20.2)
Male	1,509 (79.8)
Ethnicity (n = 1,881)	
Asian	55 (2.9)
Black	18 (1.0)
Mixed ethnicity	28 (1.5)
White	1,778 (94.5)
Other	2 (0.1)
Age (years) (n = 1,895)	
18–24	525 (27.7)
25–29	362 (19.1)
30–34	229 (12.1)
35–39	185 (9.8)
40–44	188 (9.9)
45–49	174 (9.2)
50–54	115 (6.1)
55–59	70 (3.7)
60–64	29 (1.5)
65–69	16 (0.8)
70–74	1 (0.1)
75–79	0 (0.0)
≥80	1 (0.1)
Length of service (n = 1,804)	
<6 months	132 (7.3)
>6 months but <12 months	108 (6.0)
1 year but <2 years	345 (19.1)
2 years but <5 years	514 (28.5)
5 years but <10 years	388 (21.5)
10 years but <20 years	205 (11.4)
≥20 years	112 (6.2)

the variables for which a strength of association was being tested. To explore the relationship between levels of agreement with experiential factors and self-reported morale, participants who indicated neither agree nor disagree were excluded from the analysis for each statement.

Results

The results are organized into the following sections: demographics; motivations, length of service, and age; volunteer experience, morale, and future

intentions of length of service; and reasons for considering leaving.

Demographics

Basic demographic results of the study sample ($n = 1,908$) are illustrated in Table 1. Most respondents were male ($n = 1,509$, 80%) and white ($n = 1,778$, 95%). Over a quarter of the sample were aged 18–24 years ($n = 525$, 28%), 31% ($n = 591$) were aged 25–34 years, 29% ($n = 547$) were aged 35–49, and the remaining 12% ($n = 232$) were over the age of 50 years. About one-third of respondents ($n = 585$, 32%) had been a Special for < 2 years, 29% ($n = 514$) had been a Special for between 2 and 5 years, and 39% ($n = 705$) had been a Special for 5 years or more.

Motivations, length of service, and age

This section outlines the relationship between the motivations of Specials and their length of service. The results illustrate a key difference between specials with a longer length of service and those who joined the Constabulary more recently. Whereas those with longer service indicated they were more motivated by making a difference to the community, those who had joined more recently were more motivated by potential Regular, paid employment.

Respondents were asked: 'Thinking back to when you decided to become a Special what three things did you most want to achieve from the experience?' The results show that those with < 5-years-service were less likely to select 'I wanted to give something back to my local community and to play an important part in making my local community safer' in their top three aspirations; 49% ($n = 543$) compared to 58% ($n = 224$) of those with 5–10 years-service and 65% ($n = 207$) of those with more than 10 years-service. Whereas, 65% ($n = 711$) of those with < 5-years-service included 'Hoping to join the police in paid employment' in their top three aspirations, with 50% ($n = 554$) saying it was their number 1 aspiration. This is notably higher when compared to 44% ($n = 170$) of those with 5–

10 years-service (27%, $n = 106$ saying it was their number 1 aspiration) and 35% ($n = 110$) of those with more than 10-years-service (21%, $n = 67$ saying it was their number 1 aspiration).

These differences were influenced by age differences because, as you might expect, length of service increased with age. Table 2 illustrates a comparison of results within specific age groups across the lengths of service categories, showing there were no significant differences in the proportions that selected: 'I wanted to give something back to my local community…'. For example, regardless of whether they had joined < 5 years ago, 5–10 years ago or more than 10 years ago, approximately 7 in 10 of those aged over 35 years selected 'I wanted to give something back to my local community…'. As with the giving back to the local community statement, there was no significant difference within age groups across the lengths of service categories in the proportions that selected 'hoping to join the police in paid employment'. For example, regardless of whether those 25 years and under had joined < 5 years ago or more than 5 years ago, approximately 8 in 10 selected 'hoping to join the police in paid employment'. This suggests that age is a key factor in the differences in motivations for joining the Special Constabulary rather than necessarily how long-ago respondents joined.

In terms of intended length of service, the results show just over half of Specials ($n = 1,035$, 56%) stated that they saw themselves being a Special for the long term and still volunteering in three years-time, with a further 27% ($n = 495$) intending to be volunteering for at least a year but not more than 3 years. This meant that 8% ($n = 145$) were planning to volunteer for at least 6 months but no longer than a year, with 10% ($n = 185$) planning to stop volunteering within 6 months.

Whittle (2014, p. 34) states 'if recruits are motivated by a desire to become regulars, this affects their expectations, and reduces length of service compared with recruits joining for more altruistic reasons'. The results here support this point, with around half ($n = 527$, 49%) of those that selected:

Table 2: Motivations, length of service, and age

	Motivated by wanting to give back to the community (%)	Motivated by wanting to join the police in paid employment (%)	*n*
<25			
< 5 years	42	84	529
5–10 years	39	79	28
More than 10 years	–	–	–
	$X^2=0.79$, df = 1, $P{\leq}.779$	$\chi^2=0.516$, df = 1, $P{\leq}0.473$	
25–34			
< 5 years	47	61	313
5–10 years	45	57	167
More than 10 years	49	49	35
	$\chi^2=0.305$, df = 2, $P{\leq}0.858$	$\chi^2=2.952$, df = 2, $P{\leq}0.274$	
≥35			
< 5 years	68	30	254
5–10 years	71	28	192
More than 10 years	67	33	277
	$\chi^2=1.031$, df = 2, $P{\leq}0.597$	$\chi^2=1.835$, df = 2, $P{\leq}0.399$	

'hoping to join the police in paid employment' as an aspiration also stated that they expect to be volunteering in three years-time, compared to nearly two-thirds ($n = 508$, 65%) of those that had not selected it as an aspiration.

Of those respondents that have joined in the last 2 years, over half ($n = 330$, 56%) were aged 25 years and under, 26% ($n = 152$) were between 26–34 years, and 18% ($n = 103$) were 36 years and over. Of those ≤25 years, 86% ($n = 330$) stated they were 'hoping to join the police in paid employment', compared to 59% ($n = 152$) of 26–35 year olds and 36% ($n = 103$) of those 36 years and over. The proportion of those <2 years-service that indicated that they saw themselves volunteering in 3 years-time increased with age, with 43% ($n = 320$) of those aged 25 years and under indicating that they saw themselves volunteering in 3 years-time compared to 53% ($n = 146$) of those aged 26–35 years and 75% ($n = 100$) of those aged ≥36 years.

The results, therefore, show how most Specials recruited recently are more likely to be relatively younger and more likely to be primarily motivated by joining the police in Regular paid employment.

Furthermore, the results suggest that age is a more important factor than length of service when understanding the motivations of Specials.

The relationship between volunteering experience, morale, and intentions of future length of service

This section provides an overview of the results relating to the relationship between volunteering experience, morale and length of service. A chi-squared test of independence was performed to examine the relationship between the results for the statements relating to the experience of being a Special and self-reported morale, illustrated in Table 3. When analysing the results, morale was identified as the most significant factor associated with expected length of service. Only 11% ($n = 149$) of those that agreed their morale was good ($n = 1,307$) indicated that they did not see themselves volunteering for more than a year, compared to 50% ($n = 109$) that disagreed that their morale was good [$\chi^2(1) = 195.136$, $P < 0.001$].

Table 3: Associations between volunteer experience and morale

	N	Agreed with the statement whose morale is good (%)	Disagreed with the statement whose morale is good (%)	Phi	χ^2	df	P
Management and supervision							
I am satisfied with the level of supervision I receive in providing me with the personal and professional support I need	1,285	95.2	57.8	0.465	278.071	1	0.000
The force is good at managing volunteers	1,167	97.0	65.7	0.417	202.499	1	0.000
I like and enjoy the work I have been asked to do							
Training							
I received the initial training I required to be effective when I began my volunteering role	1,221	90.6	72.4	0.231	64.930	1	0.000
I am receiving sufficient ongoing training to remain effective in my role as a volunteer	1,256	93.5	63.7	0.376	177.561	1	0.000
Recognition, appreciation and fair treatment							
My efforts as a volunteer are well recognized	1,209	95.1	53.8	0.497	298.489	1	0.000
I feel appreciated by the police service for the work I put in and the impact I make	1,230	95.7	56.8%	0.484	288.568	1	0.000
I feel that I am treated fairly as a volunteer	1,345	92.3	38.7	0.447	268.197	1	0.000
Making a difference to the community							
I feel I have made a difference to my community	1,251	88.0	57.8	0.194	46.980	1	0.000
I feel I have helped to tackle crime/anti-social behaviour in my community	1,255	87.5	56.0	0.179	40.003	1	0.000
I feel I have supported my local Police Service	1,463	88.3	35.3	0.284	118.244	1	0.000
Skill recognition and development							
The force understands the particular skills and experience I bring and has given me opportunities to utilize the full range of my skills and experience whilst volunteering	1,092	94.4	71.5	0.314	107.836	1	0.000
I have been given opportunities to develop new skills and abilities	1,261	92.3	63.1	0.341	146.415	1	0.000
Flexibility and individual need							
My Police Service is as flexible as I would like it to be about when and how long I volunteer	1,422	90.2	48.7	0.333	157.945	1	0.000
I am given the opportunity to volunteer in the areas I am interested in	1,215	92.6	59.5	0.390	185.237	1	0.000
Feedback							
I've been given the opportunity to provide feedback on my role	1,208	92.7	70.6	0.295	104.786	1	0.000
I am satisfied with the level of feedback I've received on my performance	1,173	95.1	63.0	0.418	204.870	1	0.000

The statements within Recognition, Appreciation and Fair Treatment, and Management and Supervision were observed to have the highest, though moderate, effect size on self-reported morale. For individual statements, from most to least, which were found to have a moderate size effect on self-reported morale related to their efforts being well recognized [$\chi^2(1) = 298.489$, $P \leq 0.001$], feeling appreciated by their police service for the work they had put in and impact they had made

[$\chi^2(1)$ = 288.568, P ≤0.001], satisfaction with the level of supervision received in providing personal and professional support [$\chi^2(1)$ = 278.071, P ≤0.001], being treated fairly as a volunteer [$\chi^2(1)$ = 268.197, P ≤0.001], satisfaction with feedback on their performance [$\chi^2(1)$] = 204.870, P ≤0.001], and whether the force was perceived as good at managing volunteers [$\chi^2(1)$ = 202.499, P ≤0.001].

A medium strength of association was also found for statements relating to having the opportunity to volunteer in the areas they are interested in [$\chi^2(1)$ = 185.237, P ≤0.001], receiving sufficient ongoing training to remain effective in their role as a volunteer [$\chi^2(1)$ = 177.561, P ≤0.001], being given opportunities to develop new skills and abilities [$\chi^2(1)$ = 146.415, P ≤ 0.001], their police force being as flexible as they would like it to be about when and how long they volunteer [$\chi^2(1)$ = 157.945, P ≤0.001], and the force's understanding of the particular skills and experience they have and the opportunity to utilise these skills whilst volunteering [$\chi^2(1)$ = 107.836, P ≤0.001]. All other statements, while being statistically significant, were found to have a small effect size on self-reported morale.

Reasons for considering leaving

This section focuses on the reasons indicated by Specials for leaving the Special Constabulary. Table 4 illustrates reasons for leaving by age group, showing the results for those that indicated that they were likely to leave within the next 12 months. When considering the relationship between age and reasons for leaving, a medium strength of association was found for 'hoping to join the police service in regular employment' [$\chi^2(4)$ = 114.233, P ≤0.001]. Planning to join the Regular Constabulary was the most common reason for those aged under 25 years (n = 76, 77%) and those aged 25–34 years (n = 44, 40%). The most common reason for those aged 35 years

and over for leaving was 'feeling dissatisfied with how they are managed as a volunteer' (n = 49, 46%). A change in personal circumstances was indicated as a factor in leaving by approximately a third (n = 31, 29%) of Specials aged 25–34 years, and by about a fifth of those 25 years and under (n = 20, 21%) and by those 35 years and over (n = 22, 21%). Significance was not found between leaving due to a change in personal circumstances and age.

When analysing the reasons of those who were likely to leave in the next 12 months against length of service, for those that have served under five years (n = 174), the most common reason for leaving in the next 12 months was that they were planning to join the Regulars (n = 102, 59%). Specials with over five years' service (n = 144) were significantly less likely to indicate this, with only 13% (n = 17) giving this as a reason [$\chi^2(2)$ = 71.680, P <0.001]. The second most common reason for those with <5 years' service was 'feeling dissatisfied with how well they are managed as a volunteer' (n = 46, 27%) and the third most common reason being 'not feeling supported to develop in the role and do new things' (n = 40, 24%). Those with < 5 year-service were more likely to suggest they were leaving because they were moving, 8% (n = 14) compared to 2% (n = 2) of those with more than 5 years-service [$\chi^2(2)$ = 10.518, P ≤0.005].

For those with 5 years' service or more, the most common reason for wanting to leave was 'feeling dissatisfied with how well they are managed as a volunteer' (n = 49, 38%), followed by 'not feeling sufficiently appreciated as a volunteer' (n = 41, 31%). Indeed, those with more than 5-years-service, when compared to those with <5-years-service, were significantly more likely to say that they did not feel sufficiently appreciated as a volunteer [$\chi^2(2)$ = 15.599, P ≤ 0.001]. Those with more than five years' service were also significantly more likely to indicate 'feeling discriminated against' as a reason for leaving [$\chi^2(2)$ = 8.797, P ≤ 0.005]. Interestingly, although 'personal

Table 4: Associations between reasons for leaving and age

	N	Aged r<25 years (%)	Aged 25–34 years (%)	Aged ≥35 years (%)	Cramers V	χ^2	df	P
I hope to join the police in paid employment	312	77	40	7	0.428	114.233	4	0.001
A change in my personal circumstances that make it more difficult to volunteer	308	21	29	21	0.096	5.658	4	0.226
I do not feel sufficiently appreciated as a volunteer	309	21	19	32	0.181	20.312	4	0.000
I have not been supported to develop in the role and do new things	307	12	20	35	0.214	28.022	4	0.000
I feel dissatisfied with how I am managed as a volunteer	308	19	29	46	0.237	34.527	4	0.000
I am not doing the work I would most like to do as a volunteer	306	13	26	29	0.172	18.035	4	0.001
Some people in the organization are negative about volunteers and that has put me off	306	19	20	30	0.093	5.336	4	0.255
I am not doing the things which are worthwhile as a volunteer	305	14	18	20	0.126	9.761	4	0.045
I had never anticipated doing the volunteering role for a longer period of time	306	12	9	4	0.175	18.800	4	0.001
I am moving to a different area	304	10	4	2	0.189	21.622	4	0.000
I has not been the experience I had hoped it would be	304	10	13	19	0.131	10.416	4	0.034
I feel discriminated against	307	4	10	14	0.133	10.927	4	0.027

circumstances' ($n = 35$, 27%) was the third most common reason for this group, it was joint third with 'not doing the work that they would most like to do as a volunteer' ($n = 35$, 27%) and 'Some people in the workplace are negative about volunteers' ($n = 35$, 27%).

When considering the relationship between reasons for leaving and gender, there were no significant differences in males and females reasons for leaving. Although females were not significantly more likely to leave within a year ($n = 75$, 20% compared to $n = 253$, 17% of males), they were significantly less likely to say that they saw themselves volunteering in 3 years' time, 47% ($n = 177$) compared to 58% ($n = 845$) of males [$\chi^2(4) = 14.275$, $P \leq 0.05$].

The relationship between reasons for leaving and ethnicity was also considered. There was no significant difference in the proportion of white British and other ethnic groups in expected length of service, though, there were differences in their indicated reasons for why they might leave. It is noted, however, due to the small number of respondents from other ethnic groups, all responses were analysed as to why they might choose to leave rather than only those that indicated that they were planning to leave within the next 12 months as above. For those ≥35 years, the only significant difference was that non-white British were more likely to say that they would definitely or possibly leave due to moving house, 21% ($n = 13$) compared to 15% ($n = 44$) of white British [$\chi^2 = 7.140$, $P \leq 0.005$].

There were many significant differences identified for those <35 years when exploring their reasons for leaving. Those from a non-white British background compared to white British were significantly less likely [$\chi^2(2) = 10.389$, $P \leq 0.05$] to indicate that they would definitely leave to join the Regulars (46%, $n = 26$–66%, $n = 453$, respectively) and were more likely [$\chi^2(2) = 7.446$, $P = <0.05$] to state that they would definitely leave due to

personal circumstances (26%, $n = 14$–21%, $n = 137$, respectively). People from a non-white British background compared to white British were also more likely to indicate that they would definitely or possibly leave due to:

- it not being the experience they had hoped it would be [$\chi^2(2) = 11.860$, $P \leq 0.05$) (42%, $n = 22$–22%, $n = 141$, respectively);

- moving house [$\chi^2(2) = 10.172$, $P \leq 0.05$] (47%, $n = 25$–27%, $n = 179$, respectively);

- 'not doing the work they would most like to do as a volunteer' [$\chi^2(2) = 10.162$, $P \leq 0.05$) (59%, $n = 31$–38%, $n = 245$, respectively);

- feeling that they are doing things which are worthwhile as a volunteer [$\chi^2(2) = 6.067$, $P \leq 0.05$] (41%, $n = 22$–28%, $n=184$, respectively); and

- not feeling supported to develop in the role and do new things [$\chi^2(2) = 6.636$, $P \leq 0.05$] (59%, $n = 32$–41%, $n = 270$, respectively).

Discussion

As the first national-scale survey of Special Constables, with responses from Specials in every police force across England and Wales, the results provide a comprehensive insight than had previously been available in respect of the national picture of the motivations of those who volunteer as Special Constables, and specifically into what factors appear most significant in shaping decisions to leave the Special Constabulary. While the survey results resonate in several key respects with previous work, they also provide a timely updating of a research-base that is now somewhat dated, with previous multi-force survey studies published in Leon (1991), Mirrlees-Black and Byron (1994), Gaston and Alexander (2001), and NPIA (2010). The response from across 44 police forces also reflects a considerably greater spread than in previous multi-force survey studies, which have drawn responses from between 3 and 13 police forces

(Leon, 1991; Mirrlees-Black and Byron, 1994; Gaston and Alexander, 2001; NPIA, 2010).

The survey results emphasized more clearly, than has been the case in previous research, the diversity and multiplicity of motivations for volunteering as a Special Constable. The results reflected that while multiple motivations to join the Special Constabulary are typical, those who have recently joined (within the past 2 years) and were aged <25-years-old were more likely to be motivated by ambitions in the future to become a 'Regular' (paid) police officer, whereas motivations to make a difference to the community were more evident in new joiners aged ≥25 years, and particularly in those aged ≥35 years. Younger recent joiners (aged <25 years) were also less likely to see themselves still volunteering as a Special Constable in 3 years' time than were Specials who were older when they joined.

These results resonate with the findings of previous research, by providing more robust evidence of the value for police forces in recruiting more 'career' Specials. That is, Specials who are not motivated by paid career aspirations in the police, and who may be older and more stable in personal and professional lives having made 'life choices' (Alexander, 2000), and thus likely on the whole to stay for longer within the Special Constabulary. Extending the periods Specials stay in the Special Constabulary helps to enhance 'value for money', particularly as significant proportions of cost relating to Specials are at the front-end of their life cycle, relating to equipment, initial recruitment and training (Whittle, 2014). Furthermore, it also should positively contribute to the overall operational experience and competency of the Special Constabulary, which in turn should enhance role and contribution. While previous surveys have identified the significance of whether Specials are motivated by a desire to join up as a Regular, or not, as a key factor in shaping volunteer career length and attrition (Leon, 1991; Mirrlees-Black and Byron, 1994; Gaston and Alexander, 2001; Whittle, 2014), this paper provides greater clarity

both into the demography of 'career' Specials, and into the interlinking factors in respect of retention that need to be considered in building a strategy for the retention of 'career' Specials.

These findings help in building what remains as a very limited evidence-base regarding 'what works' in relation to how forces should more effectively attract and retain 'career' Specials. Aspects of this may include enhancing schemes such as Employer Supported Policing (ESP), which involves a partnership between employers, their employees and the police service to work together to facilitate the employee volunteering with the police to increase public safety and confidence. Within an ESP scheme, employers release staff by giving them paid time off to undertake their volunteer police duties and/or training, with an argument that there are benefits for policing and the community, as well as for the employer and employee through the development and training provided. Other approaches to increase the proportion of 'career' Specials includes finding ways of making the Special Constabulary more attractive to ex-Regulars, and understanding how to attract older professionals.

It is, however, at the same time important not to neglect, over-problematise and assume an inevitable lack of 'value for money' in respect of younger, Regular-career motivated Special Constables. The survey findings presented here help us, for the first-time across multiple dimensions of experience and with a comprehensive national sample, to better understand the demography and motivations of this group of Specials. The approaches of police forces to the management and support of Regular-career motivated Special Constables have tended to be fractured and to not be understood and managed cohesively as a single journey, with a lack of holistic understandings of value and of professional development across that journey. Further research is needed to fully understand how to maximize the whole-career contribution of these 'Regular-pathway' (and typically younger) Special Constables, and to create an improved and

more efficient experience as they progress both in serving their communities as volunteers and in pursuing their ultimate ambitions of a paid career in policing.

Previous research, in particular Mirrlees-Black and Byron (1994) and Gaston and Alexander (2001), has identified the disconnect between 'official' explanations given by Special Constables (and by police forces) for resignation, indicating the importance of wider elements of life beyond the specific experiences of volunteering as a Special. Similarly, the findings from this survey point to the importance of the experience of being a Special Constable in shaping decisions to stay or to leave, adding a greater level of insight by exploring the interlinkages between different factors and the salience of morale as a factor in shaping intentions to stay or leave. The results show a strong link between Special Constables' perspectives of their morale, and their expectations of how long they will remain volunteering with the Special Constabulary. The survey results identify several key factors associated with morale including feeling recognized and appreciated for their service and contribution, their perspectives on the adequacy of supervision and related personal and professional support and opportunities for feedback, and their perceptions of being treated fairly. Similarly, while leaving to join the Regulars was the most common factor identified by Special Constables who had <5-years-service and were considering leaving within the next 12 months, dissatisfaction with how well they were managed as a volunteer was the second most common factor identified. For those Special Constables considering leaving in the next 12 months who had more than 5 years' of service, this was the most common factor.

The evidence presented in this article suggests that police forces need a greater emphasis, strategically and operationally, on improving the morale and related dimensions of experience of their Special Constables. Moreover, the findings signal morale to be the bedrock upon which improved retention within the Special Constabulary will be

built. These findings disrupt legacy narratives within police organizations that Special Constabulary retention is primarily driven by Regular-recruitment and by external contexts and factors beyond the control of those leading and supporting Special Constables. As Britton and Knight (2016, p. 4) argue 'any high-quality volunteering programme focuses on making the voluntary experience as good as it can possibly be'. The survey results support an emphasis on quality of experience, if higher morale, greater retention and longer careers in the Special Constabulary are to be achieved. The findings of the survey emphasize elements of experience such as recognition, appreciation and support as being critical to morale and longevity in role are consistent with the wider research-base, both in terms of Special Constables (Gaston and Alexander, 2001; Whittle, 2014) and more widely across volunteer populations. Zhao *et al.* (2002) contend such aspects may be of a particular salience for volunteers within criminal justice and community safety voluntary settings, given the 'dark side' of social and operational contexts sometimes encountered within the voluntary activity. The importance of 'connectedness' and 'contribution' have been recognized across a range of studies of volunteer engagement and longevity (Kramer, 2001; Huynh *et al.*, 2012; Walker *et al.*, 2016).

Another key element of the Special Constable experience that the survey findings identified as being important to decisions to leave or stay in the Special Constabulary, are factors around the police force understanding and utilising the skills that the Special Constables possess and enhancing opportunities to develop in the role. Again, the survey findings are consistent with a wider literature, with Whittle (2014) identifying the importance of 'meaningful deployment' to morale and retention, and Caless (2017, pp. 24–25) identifying the need for police forces to think more boldly about the role and contribution of Special Constables, arguing that "the 'default' deployment for special constables seems to be uniformed foot patrol and mobile patrol, which, while expedient and perfectly laudable, may not always make the best use of skills that volunteers bring to the sector". The findings are also resonant with wider themes in the volunteering literature, with Saksida *et al.* (2017) identifying the importance of 'role mastery' for volunteer commitment and longevity, and Iverson (2013, p. 45) outlining the importance for volunteers in joining, connecting, belonging and sustaining in voluntary roles of 'the communicative enactment of belonging' that associates with training and development activities for volunteers within organizations.

There is a need for police forces to develop a greater emphasis on career development, skills audits, training needs assessments, and skills utilization and development for Specials, especially those who join with the intent to have longer careers within the Special Constabulary. Forces need to be more flexible and imaginative in drawing upon the range and depth of skills, perspectives and experience that their Special Constables bring from outside of policing, and in exploring new ways of maximizing the effect of those skills or the organizational development, leadership and delivery of the whole policing organization. This will challenge aspects of policing culture, which tends to be somewhat insular in terms of the appreciation only of skills, training and experience developed and accredited within policing, and somewhat ignorant and disengaged with expertise, experience, and perspectives derived from beyond the sector. One element of this will be the development of opportunities for Specials to engage in specialist areas of policing; an aspect where there is sporadic progress nationally in terms of force developments (Britton *et al.*, 2016; Johnson *et al.*, 2018). Another key developmental area for police forces is to improve the role development opportunities that relate to leadership training, development, and roles within the Special Constabulary (Britton and Borland-Jones, 2017).

The results also demonstrated that fewer female Special Constables saw themselves volunteering in 3

years' time than their male counterparts, resonant with the finding of Gaston and Alexander (2001). There has been very limited research into diversity and the Special Constabulary (Bullock, 2014b), and the results presented here prompt the need to develop greater understanding and insight into the experience and engagement of female Specials, and how the experience of being a Special Constable may differ by gender. Fewer new-in-service female Specials intending to stay longer-term contributes to other key challenges, not least the gender imbalance in leadership roles within the Special Constabulary (Britton and Borland-Jones, 2017; Britton *et al.*, 2016). Analysis of data in respect of gender and Special Constables (Britton, 2018b) suggests results presented in this article sit consistently with other data. For example, that the attrition rate for female Specials has been consistently higher than that for male Specials over the past two decades of national police workforce returns, that data from specific force settings suggests fewer female Specials have longer careers ($\geq$5years) within the Special Constabulary, and that female representation in the Special Constabulary is now almost the lowest proportion, with only Regular Officers being lower, across the police family. This paper provides further weight towards a call for the gendered context of the experience of the Special Constabulary to be far better understood.

For younger BME Specials (aged <35 years), there were some important differences in the results when compared to white-British Specials. Younger BME Special Constables were less likely to state that they anticipate definitely leaving to join the Regulars, and were more likely to state they would leave because the experience had not been what they had hoped it would be, that they were not doing the activity as a Special Constable that they would most like to do, that they did not feel they were doing things that were worthwhile, and that they did not feel supported to develop in the role and to do new things.

In the same vein as the above discussion in relation to gender, there is very limited research into

ethnicity and the Special Constabulary (Bullock, 2014b). The proportion of BME Specials remains very low in the population of Special Constabularies outside of London (Britton, 2017a, p. 16). Findings presented here suggest failings in the leadership, support, integration and deployment of BME Special Constables. The elements of not feeling supported to develop and to do new things is consistent with a current picture of practice within Special Constabularies, in which the diversity of leadership teams is limited, and the diversity of Specials in specialist roles is likewise limited. This article should prompt police forces to develop far greater understandings of how to attract, and to retain, a diversity of Special Constables representative of and reaching across all communities served by the policing organization.

Overall, the results are largely contradictory of any viewpoints that attribute attrition from the Special Constabulary primarily to changes in personal circumstances and other factors extraneous to the volunteering experience, rather demonstrating such factors are less important than factors directly relating to elements of their experience as a Special Constable.

Conclusion

This article provides original insight, based upon the first comprehensive national survey sample across police forces in England and Wales, into factors associated with attrition from Special Constabularies, identifying key elements of the demography, motivations and experience of being a Special Constable which associate with decisions to leave. The survey results emphasize a need for new strategies in police forces to improve Special Constable retention. The issue of concerns regarding high rates of attrition in the Special Constabulary has been a long-running one (Gill and Mawby, 1990; Leon, 1991; Mirrlees-Black and Byron, 1994; Gaston and Alexander, 2001), but the

reality is that little has changed in terms of police forces delivering improvement to those debates over several decades. This paper provides a robust evidence-base upon which to conceive and build new approaches to retention. The analysis suggests that strategic approaches will require a stronger focus on improving morale and experience; a focus on sustaining and developing the voluntary careers of longer-serving, older, 'career' Specials; a need to better understand and enhance pathways into the Regular service, seeing this as one holistic journey in terms of whole-career value and professional development; and a priority to address issues of gender and ethnic diversity, in particular those factors which seem to associate with the earlier-exiting of female and BME Special Constables compared to the cohort as a whole. In terms of driving improvements in experience, the survey findings point to the need for an emphasis on key aspects of recognition, appreciation, fairness, supervision, professional and role development, and skills recognition and utilization.

To achieve such change and to deliver a strategic shift in levels of retention in the Special Constabulary does not just require some tactical and operational adjustments, it requires shifts in strategic understandings of the Special Constabulary and an uplift in strategic focus, to combat the current low strategic visibility of Specials in police strategic thinking (Britton and Callender, 2017, pp. 149–150) which are arguably "reflective of a paradigm of 'regular-centrism' within policing" (Callender *et al.*, 2018: 2). The Special Constabulary delivers over 3.5-million-hours of volunteer contribution to policing; with estimations of cash-value equivalence in the region of £50–100 million (Britton *et al.*, 2016). Hence, there is a need to develop greater differentiation of roles and pathways, stronger recognition and championing of Specials, shifts in strategic paradigm so that leaders recognize the Special Constabulary as a voluntary organization, and provide serious and sustained strategic commitment (Crawford, 2008) in terms of leadership and

resource in enhancing role and experience across Special Constabularies to better convert investments made into impact to and value of the Special Constabulary within force-wide objectives. Cultural change, with greater appreciation and understanding, is required if police forces are to embrace the advantages of pluralized approaches to policing delivery (Stenning and Shearing, 2015, p. 7). Finally, there is a need for a fundamentally different vision in policing towards the Special Constabulary (Britton and Knight, 2016), to shift it from the 'peripheral' and 'precarious' position (Gill and Mawby, 1990, p. 144) it currently tends to occupy to a position where a new model can be developed and sustained (Britton and Callender, 2017).

While this article provides a new comprehensive insight into the context of attrition within the Special Constabulary, further research is greatly needed. Research at a more local level in individual Special Constabularies will be beneficial in further building an insightful picture in respect of attrition, especially longitudinal research to better understand 'career' development of Specials. This article, therefore, represents a 'call to action'; for police forces across England and Wales to engage in research to improve the value of, and experience within, the Special Constabulary. The problem of attrition in the Special Constabulary has been recognized for some time; these results provide a significant step in developing understandings of why Special Constables leave and what strategic and practical steps forces need to take to impact upon attrition from their Special Constabularies in the future.

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