



Institute for  
**Public Safety  
Crime and Justice**

# **Perspectives on Taser and the Special Constabulary**

**Report of findings from the national survey of  
Special Constables in England & Wales**

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# Introduction

## Commissioning and purpose of the survey

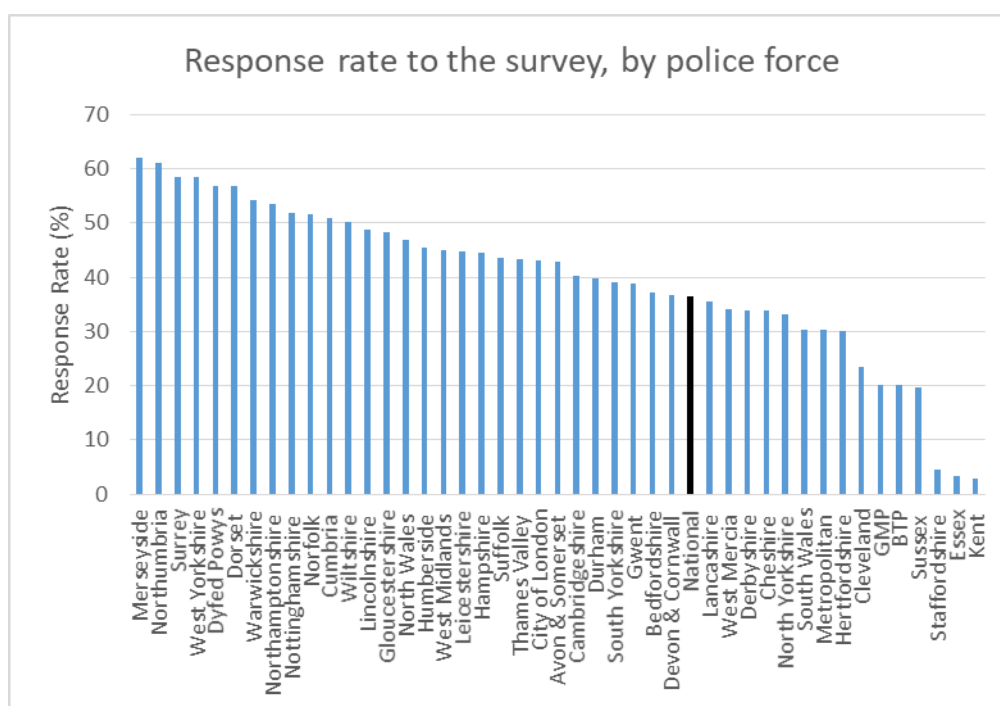
The survey was commissioned to inform national considerations in respect of Special Constables carrying Taser. The purpose of the survey was to develop greater insight at a national level into the perspectives of Special Constables across forces on the issue of Specials being trained and equipped with Taser, and to facilitate all Specials to have a 'voice' feeding into the national considerations.

A short online survey was disseminated via forces between February and April 2019. The survey was designed and responses analysed free-of-charge by the Institute for Public Safety, Crime and Justice, University of Northampton.

## The response to the survey

The survey received a strong response, with 4,130 completions. National statistics suggest there to be 11,343 Specials nationally, and based upon that figure this would represent a 36% response rate. The survey response is the largest ever for a survey of Special Constables across England and Wales.

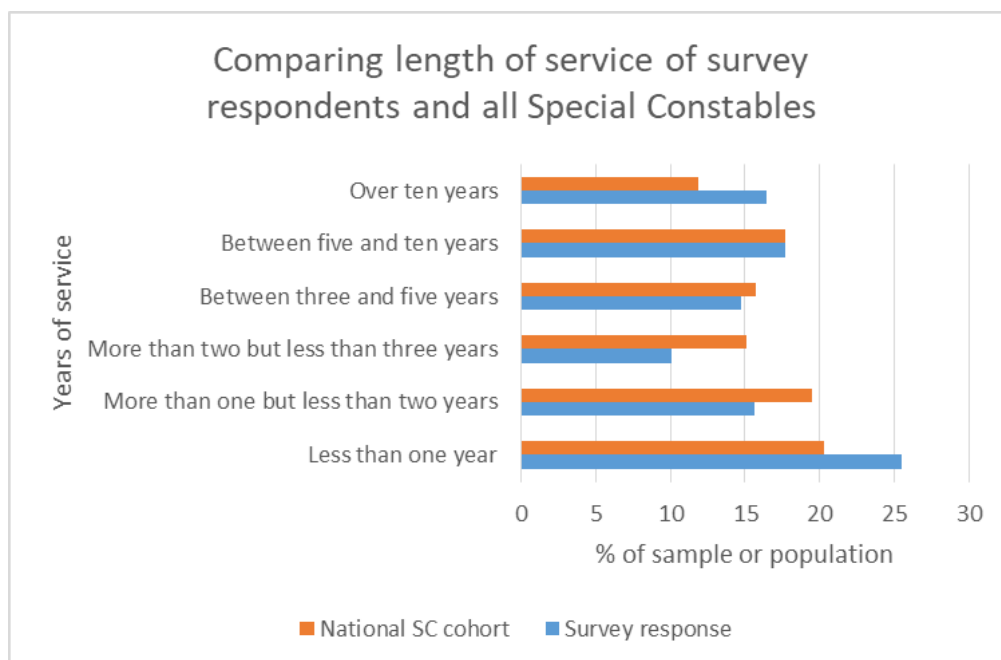
The process of dissemination of the survey relied upon police forces distributing to their Special Constables, in part in order to ensure integrity of the survey by not providing it as a public link. Overall, good engagement and response was achieved across almost all police forces. In twelve forces over half of Specials responded to the survey. Only three forces (Staffordshire, Essex and Kent) experienced low rates of response. The high rates of response across most forces represents a strong national coverage overall to the data, and also reflects that Taser appears to be a highly salient issue for Special Constables across police force areas.



Of the respondents who stated gender in the survey, 82.7% were male and 17.3% female. This represents an over-representation of male respondents compared to the Special Constabulary population as a whole, which most recent national statistics suggest is 71.0% male and 29.0% female.

In respect of ethnicity, 9.1% of survey respondents identified as BME, compared to national statistics suggesting 10.4% BME Special Constables nationally. However, this small difference can probably be accounted for in terms of uneven geographical response (e.g. slightly lower response in the MSC than the national response rate, given the MSC has a much higher proportion of BME Specials than most forces nationally).

The graph below shows the survey response by length of service, plotted alongside the length of service profile for Special Constables nationally as a whole. Broadly speaking, the survey has achieved a relatively good reach across different lengths of service. In particular, most Special Constabulary surveys struggle to achieve good response from young-in-service Specials, and in that regard the slight over-representation of Specials with less than one year of service is unusual compared to other surveys of Specials. The relative over-representation of longer-in-service Specials, and related proportionate under-representation of those with 1-3 years of service, likely accounts for some part of the under-representation of female Specials, as data nationally suggests Specials who have served 10 years and more are predominantly male.



# Findings

## Summary of key findings

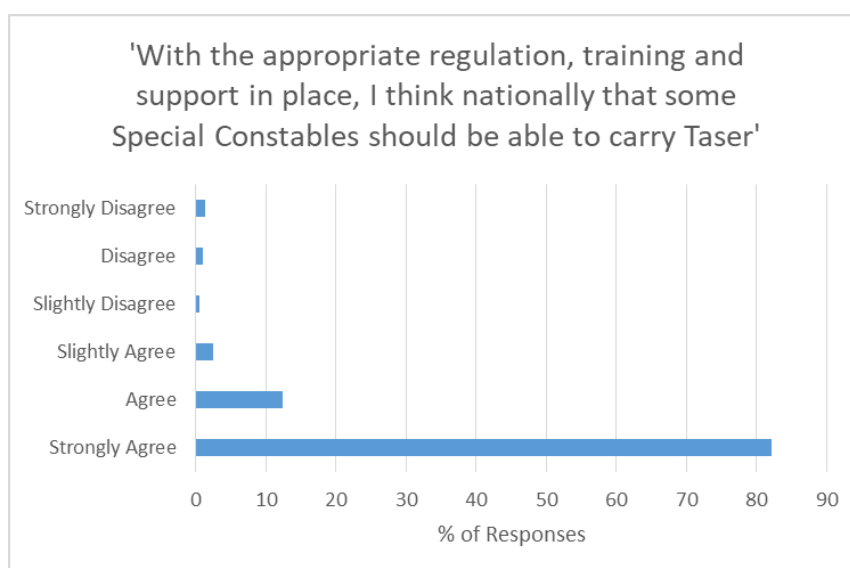
The survey achieved a large response, with 4,130 responses representing an estimated response rate of over 36%. Key findings from the survey include:

- The overwhelming majority of respondents to the survey (97%) felt that with appropriate regulation, training and support in place, some Specials should be able to carry Taser, with 82% strongly agreeing that they should. Only 1.4% strongly disagreed;
- Nine out of ten respondents to the survey said that they were prepared to undertake assessment, to commit to training, and to carry Taser personally;
- There was a much more mixed picture in respect of perspectives of whether the arrangements and resources are in place to support Specials (in terms of representation and advice) when carrying Taser. Less than half of Specials felt such support was in place (44%), a quarter felt that it was not (25%), and 29% were not sure or would require further information. This suggests overall a lack of current confidence in such support arrangements in respect of Special Constables.

## Should some Special Constables be able to carry Taser?

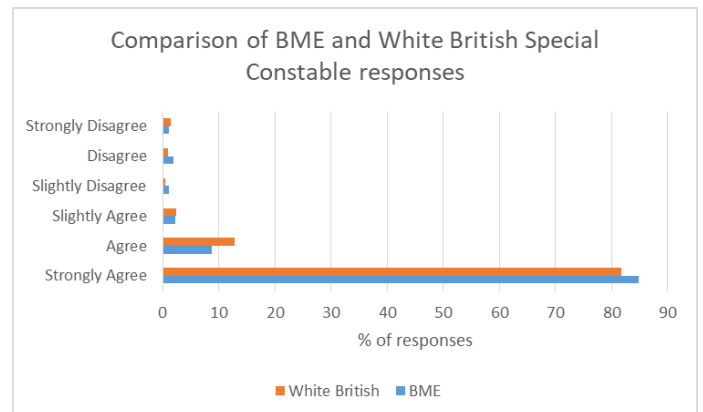
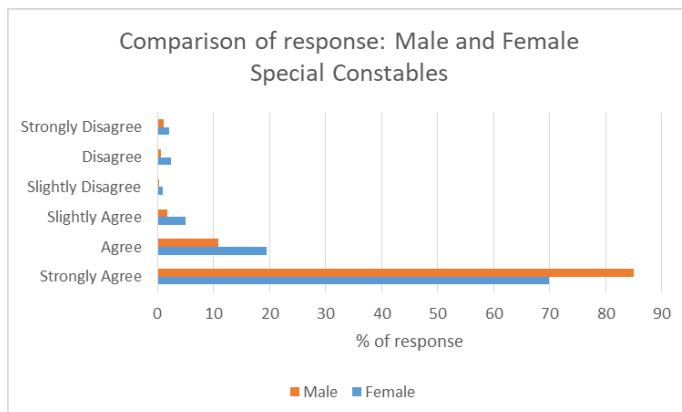
The survey responses indicate a very strong support for some Specials being able to carry Taser.

Responses to the question 'with the appropriate regulation, training and support in place, I think nationally that some Special Constables should be able to carry Taser?', almost all responses (97%) were in agreement, with almost five out of six Specials (82%) 'strongly' agreeing.

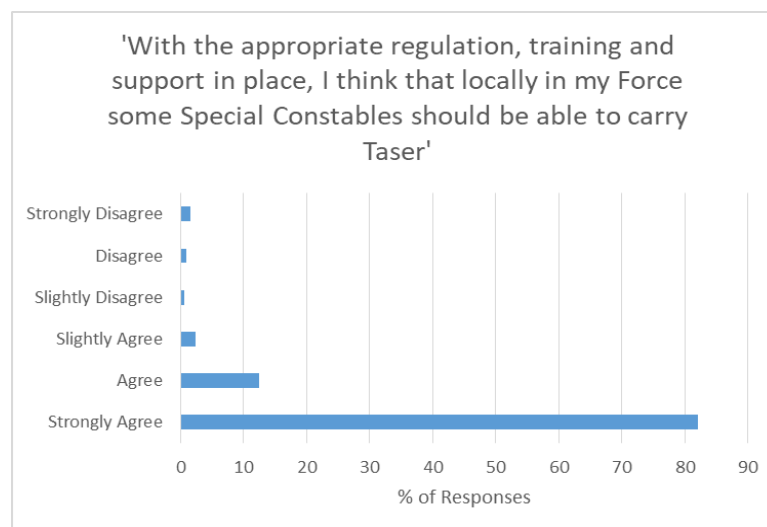


The response pattern to this question was broadly the same for BME and White British Specials. There were some differences in respect of gender. Whilst overall female Specials who were in

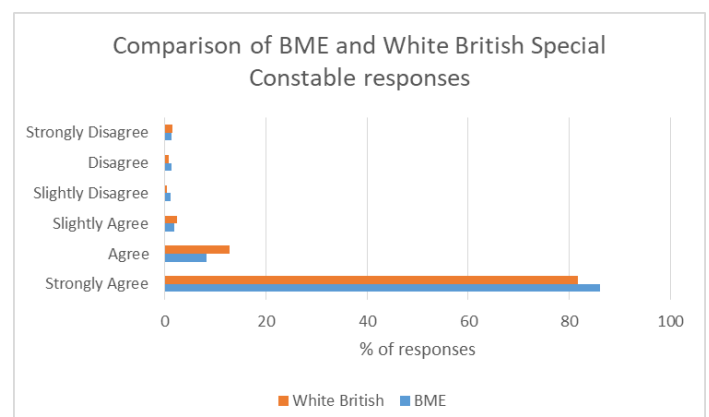
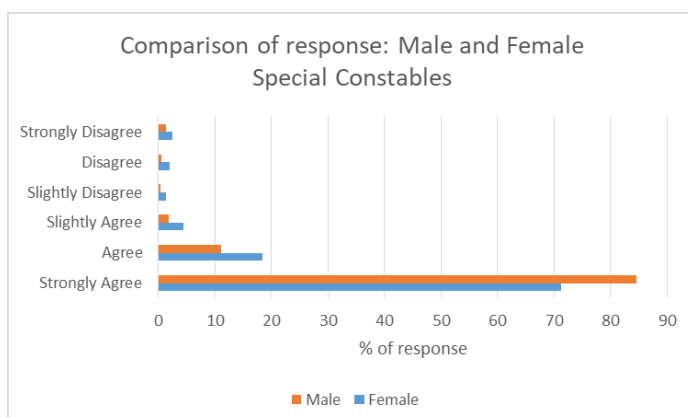
agreement were still very much in the majority (94%), a lower proportion of female Specials (71%) than male Specials (85%) indicated they 'strongly' agreed.



The survey also asked a similar question, but framed specifically in respect of the Special Constables local force area. The Specials were asked 'with the appropriate regulation, training and support in place, I think that locally in my Force some Special Constables should be able to carry Taser?' The response pattern was similarly very strongly in favour of some Specials being able to carry Taser, again with 97% in agreement, and 82% indicating they 'strongly' agreed.

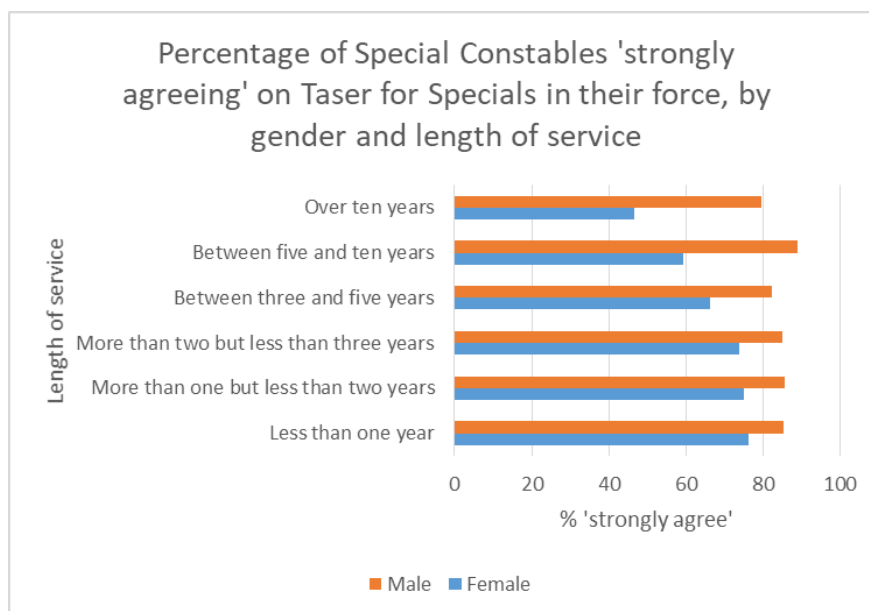


Consistent with the question at a national level, focusing on their own police force context, BME Specials responded very similarly to White British Specials, and female Specials whilst remaining

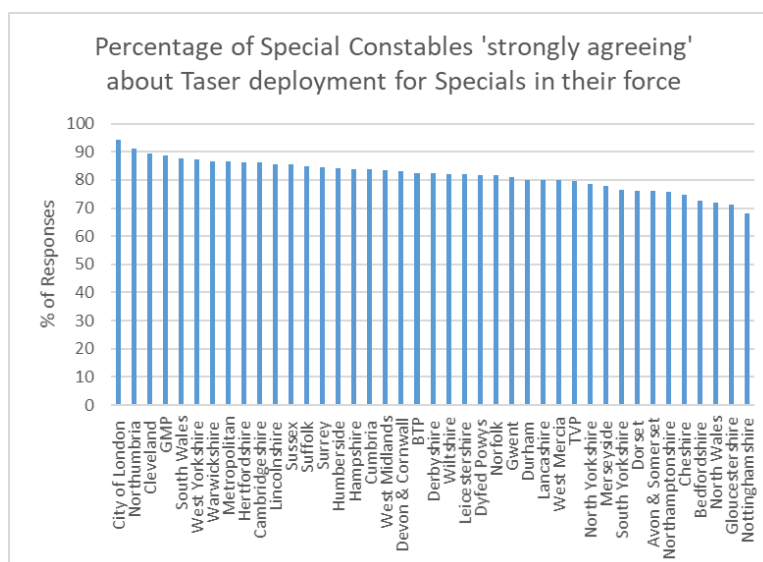


predominantly supportive of Specials carrying Taser were again less strongly so overall than their male colleagues (71% of female Specials 'strongly' agreeing, and 85% of male Specials).

Looking at responses to this question by the length of service of Specials, broadly speaking length of service does not seem to have any effect on response for male Specials. However, for female Specials it appears that those with longer service are less likely to be supportive of Specials carrying Taser. Indeed this effect of reducing support with length of service for female Specials is quite marked, with only a minority (47%) of female Specials with over ten years of service 'strongly' agreeing that Specials in their force should carry Taser.



Looking at the responses across force areas, a picture of support for Specials carrying Taser can be seen consistently across all police force areas. The graph below shows the proportion of Specials who were 'strongly' in agreement by force area (omitting Essex, Kent and Staffordshire where response numbers were low). Whilst the picture across all forces was consistently supportive of Specials carrying Taser, there is also a relatively broad spread in the data, with those indicating 'strong' agreement ranging from 90% and upwards to just below 70%.



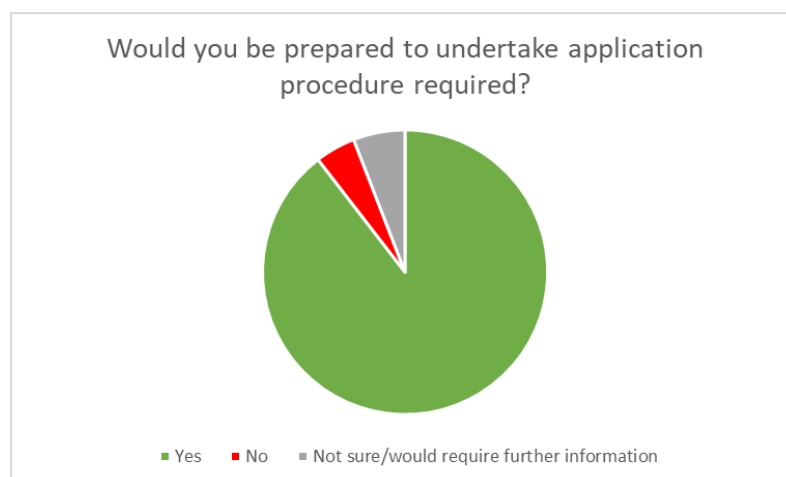
## Personal perspectives on carrying Taser

The survey asked Specials several questions regarding whether they *personally* would wish to carry Taser, and specifically within that whether they would be prepared to undertake related aspects of assessment and training. The survey responses indicate that a large majority of Specials say they would be interested in carrying Taser and would commit to the related requirements.

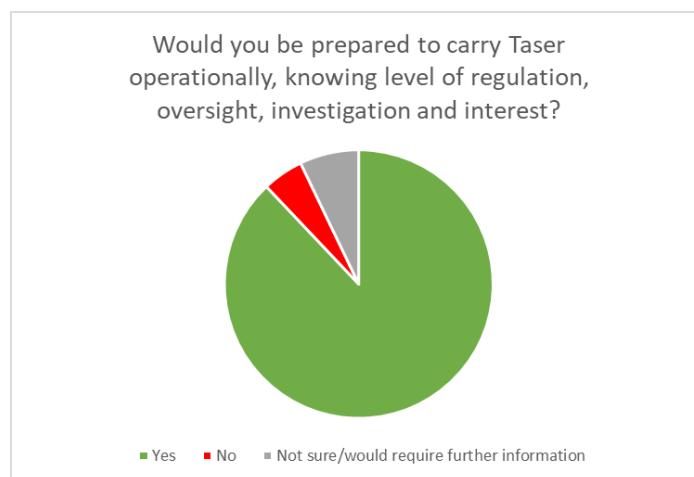
Overall, 89% of Specials indicated they would be interested in making themselves available for additional training and assessment. Whilst the figure was still in a large majority for female Specials (79%) it was lower than for male Specials (91%). The response for BME Specials (90% saying 'yes') was reflective of the result for all Specials.



Very similar results were reflected for Specials being prepared to undertake required application and assessments, with 89% saying 'yes' (again, with female Specials having a lower response of 77% saying 'yes', compared to 92% for male Specials).

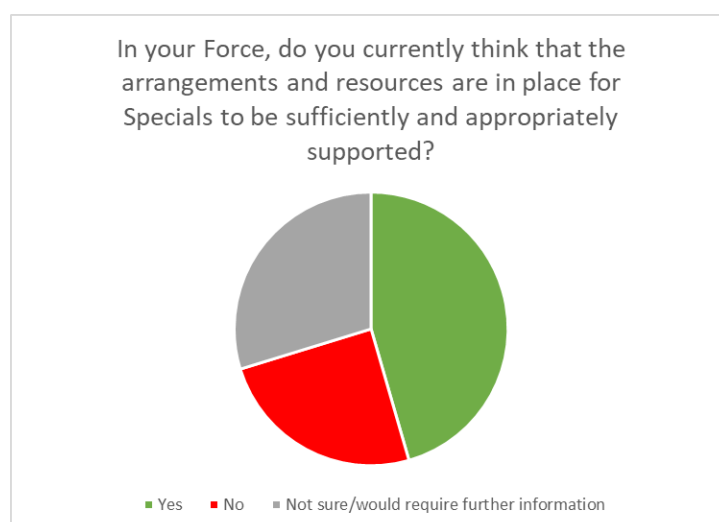


Specials were also asked to consider the implications of carrying Taser, in terms of formal oversight and public scrutiny. Again, a large majority (87%) of Specials indicated they would be prepared to carry Taser despite these elements of context (including 75% of female Specials and 90% of male Specials).



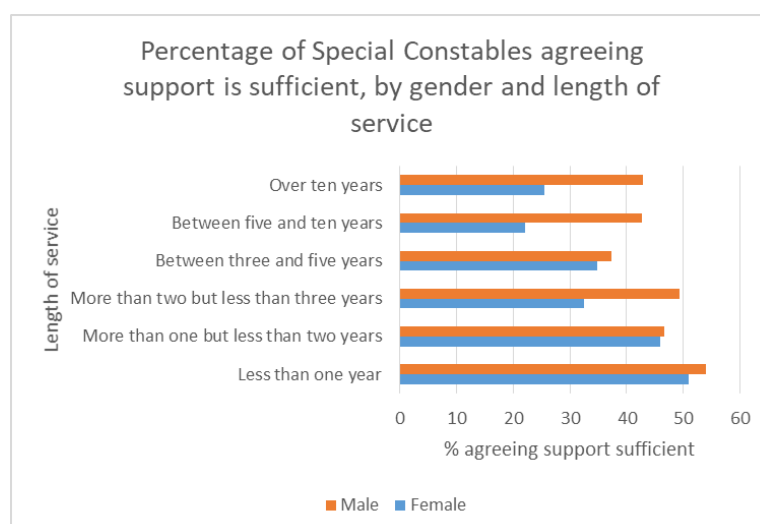
### Perspectives on arrangements and resources for support of Special Constables

The survey also asked Specials about their perceptions as to whether sufficient and appropriate support was in place for Special Constables in the context of them carrying Taser. The responses to this question were distinctly more mixed. Asked the question 'in your Force, do you currently think that the arrangements and resources are in place for Special Constables to be sufficiently and appropriately supported (e.g. in terms of representation and advice) in the contexts which may arise from carrying Taser?', 44% of Specials responded 'yes', 25% answered 'no', and 29% indicated that they were not sure or would require further information. The responses to this question were broadly consistent across the respondents (42% of female Specials, 45% of male Specials, and 43% of BME Specials answering 'yes').

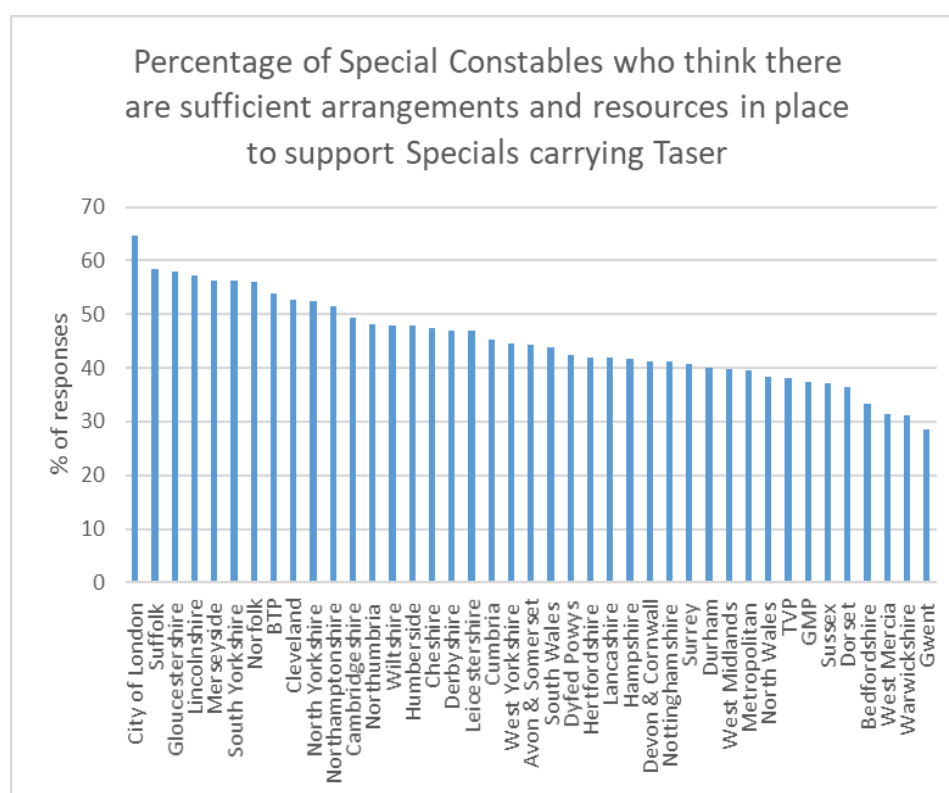


Specials who were younger-in-service were more likely to answer positively in respect of support, whilst longer-serving Specials, and particularly longer-serving female Specials, were least likely to answer positively.





There was a relatively wide variation in responses in respect of perceptions of support nationally. Two thirds of Specials in the City of London were confident support was appropriate and sufficient, whereas less than a third of Specials in Bedfordshire, West Mercia, Warwickshire and Gwent felt this to be the case. These results are consistent with other research work undertaken by the IPSCJ which has pointed to a wide variation across Special Constabularies nationally.



As might be expected, Special Constables perspectives on the sufficiency and appropriateness of support available do relate to their degree of support for Specials carrying Taser. Specials who felt sufficient and appropriate support was in place were more likely to 'strongly' agree to Specials carrying Taser (91%) than were Special Constables who did not feel support was in place (72%).

	Perspective whether sufficient support is available to Specials		
View on whether Taser should be available to some Specials in force	Yes	No	Not sure/need further information
Strongly Agree	91%	72%	79%
Agree	8%	15%	17%
Slightly Agree	1%	4%	2%
Slightly Disagree	0%	1%	1%
Disagree	0%	2%	1%
Strongly Disagree	0%	5%	0%

### Special Constable views towards the issue of Taser

The respondents to the survey were asked if they ‘had anything else they wished to add’ in respect of Taser. There were 1,751 responses that included further reflections, which provide a valuable additional perspective alongside the quantitative response data from the surveys. Key themes identified across these responses are summarised below.

#### *Same job, same risks*

By far the largest bulk of the Special Constable reflections on Taser were relating to the argument that Specials are placed in the same front-line contexts, exposed to the same risks, and have the same powers as their Regular colleagues. Therefore, they should be provided with equivalent equipment to protect the public, their colleagues and themselves as their Regular colleagues.

This was often accompanied with reflections that the threats in the operational context for policing are growing, with more exposure to violence, assaults on officers, and knife crime. That austerity has led to less ‘back up’ as front-line resources are perceived to have thinned out. That Taser deployment more generally in forces is more common than it was, leaving Specials unequipped in a context where an increasing proportion of their Regular colleagues they are operating closely alongside are equipped with Taser. And that the operational context for most Special Constables has shifted significantly over the past decade, in most cases now mirroring very closely that of their front-line Regular colleagues.

Such reflections were often accompanied by a frustration that decisions about Specials carrying Taser were viewed to have taken a very long time or to have not been seen as a priority.

#### *Arguments of equivalency and recognition of skills and experience of many Specials*

Linked to the above, another common theme across the comments of Special Constables was the broader argument of ‘equivalency’ and ‘integration’. The comments reflect wider frustrations about the status and leadership of the Special Constabulary. Challenging the tendency for Specials to be viewed separately from Regulars, and reflecting what are perceived as cultural assumptions and ignorance about the competency, value and commitment of many Specials. In particular there are feelings that the level of skill and experience of longer-serving Specials is often under-appreciated.

This thinking points to a model where if Specials demonstrate the same attributes, pass assessments, reflect commitment and undertake the same training, then there is perceived to be no reason why for Taser (as indeed for any other element of policing) Specials should not be equipped and deployed in the same manner as Regulars.

### *Concerns over support*

Many responses reflected concern about the sufficiency of support and training that would come with carrying Taser. There were some concerns at the increased risks of investigation and exposure to complaint that Taser usage might encompass for Specials. In a number of comments there were also concerns that Special Constabulary leadership teams were not viewed as adequate to the task of supporting Specials in such contexts.

### *Concerns over suitability of some Specials*

There were concerns by some over the experience, training and maturity of some (particularly younger, and younger-in-service) Specials in respect of carrying Taser. Many comments supported a differentiated approach which saw Taser as being focused on Specials who were independent and who were more experienced.

There were also concerns by some of poor standards of supervision and leadership in some Special Constabularies, which were perceived as resulting in some Specials in their forces having limited or no recent operational experience or updating of training, and yet still being classed as 'operational'.

### *Tailored approach focused on policing needs*

There were views that Taser needed to be considered in wider contexts of how officers are deployed and the roles they play. Many comments from Specials reflected views that Taser allocation and deployment for Specials should be prioritised and focused upon force needs, rather than being seen as available to all. Specifically, there were views that Specials operating in more rural areas, and often therefore operating in contexts where Taser equipped Regular officer 'back up' might be very distant, should be prioritised.