


Regular police officer perspectives on the Special Constabulary: An exploratory study

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Abstract A substantial body of research engaging volunteer Special Constables has reflected the importance for them of relationships and integration with their Regular, paid police officer colleagues. This article looks at this professional relationship from the other side, drawing upon 1,382 responses to an online survey of Regular police officers undertaken across five police forces in England and Wales. Findings point to gaps in confidence in the adequacy of recruitment, training, and initial practice competency and scepticism on leadership and strategic direction. More positive findings reflect valuing the contribution and perceptions of positive relationships. This article identifies the need for police forces to engage and involve Regular officers more constructively with the Special Constabulary. The research has a broader relevance for cultural engagement and integration across the diversity of roles in the ‘police family’, both paid and volunteer.

Introduction

There are over 10,000 volunteer Special Constables (‘Specials’) across the police forces of England and Wales (Home Office, 2019a), volunteering over 3 million hours of service per year (Britton *et al.*, 2018). Given the scale of the Special Constabulary, and the evident importance of how this large body of volunteer police constables relates to and operates with their paid (‘Regular’) police officer colleagues, little is known about the perspectives of Regulars on the Special Constabulary. In part, this reflects a broader picture in which the Special Constabulary, and voluntarism in policing more

broadly, is recognized as representing an understudied aspect of policing (Whittle, 2014; Bullock and Leeney, 2016; Dobrin and Wolf, 2016; Britton and Callender, 2018).

The operational, front-line culture in which Special Constables volunteer and their relationship with paid Regular officer colleagues is a distinct and important area of study. The settled tradition of volunteer police officers within policing (Leon, 1991; Greenberg, 2015; Dobrin, 2017; Britton and Callender, 2018; Leon, 2018; van Steden and Mehlbaum, 2019) can sometimes mask recognition of how distinctive and unusual a volunteer

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role the Special Constable is. Contrary to the dominant pattern of voluntarism in many public service organizations, the volunteer police constable is a complex, front-line, and public-facing role, which involves significant training, equipment, and expertise. The office of Constable essentially remains *the* central, core role in policing; again, it is unusual in public service organizations that this nature of core, professional role is undertaken by volunteers. Being a police officer involves a degree of exposure to risk and trauma which is uncommonly high for volunteer activities. Constables engage with highly complex, sensitive, and contested contexts such as sexual assault, domestic abuse, public protection, vulnerability, security, public protest, and mental health. Perhaps uniquely for a volunteer role, the office of constable encompasses significant powers, such as to detain and arrest individuals, to stop and search, to enter premises, to seize property and to use force. That such a role is undertaken by volunteer police constables, the Special Constabulary, who work alongside their Regular paid police officer colleagues, and often-times to the public are indistinguishable from them, marks out the role of Special Constable as being an interesting and unique form of the public service volunteer.

Research conducted over several decades with those who volunteer as Special Constables has consistently pointed to volunteer officers occupying an ill-defined, contested and at times precarious space, culturally and operationally, within police organizations (Gill, 1986; Leon, 1991; Gaston and Alexander, 2001; Bullock and Leeney, 2016; Britton and Callender, 2018). As argued by van Steden and Mehlbaum (2019, p. 420), in introducing their study of police volunteers and volunteer police officers in the Netherlands, ‘fully paid professionals are traditionally dominant in public order provision, law enforcement and criminal investigation around the world. Police volunteers can thus be considered as a minority group within the force’. The literature consistently reflects the high importance that relationships with Regulars

have on the experience of being a Special, and that these relationships can sometimes be quite challenging. Feeling useful to, and valued by, Regulars, and being integrated within policing teams, are significant factors in shaping the morale, retention, and experience of Specials (Gill and Mawby, 1990; Leon, 1991; Mirrlees-Black and Byron, 1994; Gaston and Alexander, 2001; NPIA, 2010). Several studies identify problematic experiences as a Special, including patterns of ‘hostility’ in Regular attitudes and behaviours (Leon, 1991) and a ‘caucus of scepticism’ which leads to a lack of integration with Regulars (Gill and Mawby, 1990, p. 135; Bullock and Leeney, 2016, p. 494). Based on their research with police volunteers in the Netherlands, van Steden and Mehlbaum (2019) concluded that volunteers feel uncertain and disappointed with their cultural position within the force, and that the police tend to bring an ambiguous attitude towards police volunteers that are characterized by neglect and an undervaluing of contribution. Gaston and Alexander (2001, p. 71) argued that ‘From a managerial perspective the creation of a positive working environment where mutual understanding and respect are encouraged is an intangible but vital goal’ and suggest that better training of Regular officers regarding volunteers is needed.

There is very limited research engagement directly with Regular officers regarding their perceptions and relationships with Specials and the cultural factors involved, and where there is such a research base, it is now significantly dated. Leon (1991) explored the perspectives of Regulars towards Specials, summarizing the relationship as ‘far from amicable’ (1991, p. 623). There were mixed perspectives from the Regulars engaged in her study, while 79% of the Regulars she surveyed felt that ‘Special Constables are a useful supplement to the regular force’, the same proportion (79%) agreed that ‘Special constables are inadequately trained’ (1991, p. 624). Gill and Mawby (1990) developed a basic taxonomy based on correlations between characteristics of the Regulars

engaged in their research work, and their views of Specials, suggesting older, longer serving, and higher-ranked Regulars tended to have more positive views. [Gaston and Alexander \(2001\)](#) asked Regulars and Specials what they thought motivated Specials to volunteer, and concluded that Regulars 'responses differed significantly from those actually given by Special Constables themselves and signal a gap in the attribution of motives between the groups' (2001, p. 70).

More recently, [Phillips and Terrell-Orr \(2013\)](#) explored the perspectives of Regular supervisors in respect of volunteers in policing in the USA. Their study found that exposure to volunteers enhanced levels of acceptance, and that those supervisors who had a disposition towards 'order maintenance' and 'citizen involvement' models of policing were more supportive of police volunteers than those with a 'law enforcement' disposition. Collectively, the studies do not suggest a universal or homogeneous perspective by Regulars, but rather a range of perspectives. Regulars may find value in the Special Constabulary and have positive relationships with them, but at the same time may have concerns about the adequacy of training or the motivations for volunteering.

This limited literature provides some indication towards Regular officer perspectives and relationships with Specials, but as stated above it is mostly very dated, and it is based upon a small number of studies. This article presents recent findings from the largest survey-based study of Regular officer perspectives of the Special Constabulary that has been undertaken to date. The research engaged a considerably wider range of questions than previous studies, in particular, relating to perspectives on the scope, management, and strategy of the Special Constabulary. The research also explores, in greater depth than previous studies, the patterns of response in respect of Regular officer age, ethnicity, rank, gender, length of service, and previous experience as a Special.

The Special Constabulary forms one small part of a much larger, complex, evolving plural policing

landscape ([Crawford, 2008](#); [Stenning, 2009](#); [Rogers, 2012](#); [Callender et al., 2018a](#)), encompassing a growing 'police family' of paid and voluntary roles in policing. This growing 'plurality' in policing foregrounds considerations of how Regular officers perceive, engage, and operate alongside the diverse other elements of this broader 'police family', and the case of the Regular–Special relationship is an interesting lens through which to consider this. Research into policing in England and Wales continues to evidence 'traditional', or resilient, cultural characteristics that reflect suspicion, solidarity, isolation, and mission ([Loftus 2008, 2010](#); [Cosgrove, 2016](#)). These characteristics often lead to policing failing to engage effectively with roles that differ from the office of paid Constable, including the wider 'police family', such as Police Community Support Officers (PCSOs) and civilian staff ([Reiner, 2010](#); [Cosgrove, 2016](#)). This raises questions about where the Special Constable role fits within this culture, as a fully warranted police officer role, but also as a part-time volunteer, and where Specials are perceived to sit by Regular officers in terms of a continuum of perceptions of 'outsideness' ([Campeau, 2015](#)).

Method

The data on which this article is based are from five local evaluations of Special Constabularies operating in different police forces in England and Wales. Forces have been anonymized to maintain ethical and confidential agreements. Although the choice of police force locations was in essence based upon opportunity and access relating to broader funded research projects within those police forces, collectively the forces engaged in the study do provide a cross-section of very different police force geographies and contexts. 'Force A' in the research was two neighbouring police forces combined, who have a collaborative approach to their Special Constabularies and was combined

into a single site for research. Both forces had experienced recent growth in their Special Constabularies but were at the point of the research being undertaken seeing falling numbers of Specials. There had also been some recent experimentation in training models for Specials, with less direct face-to-face contact during training phases. Both police forces had large geographies with significant rural areas but also sizeable urban conurbations. 'Force B' was a large force policing a predominantly urban area, as was 'Force D'; in both cases, these were larger than average forces with larger cohorts of Special Constables. 'Force C' was a smaller than average police force with a smaller than average Special Constabulary, policing a mix of urban and rural geography.

As part of the evaluations, an online survey was promoted by forces to Regulars to share their views on Specials and the Special Constabulary. The distribution and promotion of the survey were managed locally by forces. Although each survey contained some unique questions, there were many questions and measures that were identical and therefore were able to be synthesized. It is worth noting that one force had not included 3 of the identical 41 statements, which is reflected in a reduced response size for these statements. With over 1,300 responses, the combined evidence represents the largest dataset to draw upon to assess Regular attitudes on Specials and the Special Constabulary.

The surveys were designed to explore the perceptions of Regulars to support forces locally to develop strategies to improve the functioning of the Special Constabulary, as well as the dynamics and interactions between Specials and Regulars. Survey content was designed around five categories relating to perceptions of the Special Constabulary: 1. recruitment; 2. training; 3. management and strategy; 4. perception of value and relationships; and 5. role and scope.

There were challenges inherent in synthesizing evidence from four distinct evaluations, undertaken in different force settings. The Special

Constabularies of different police forces vary substantially in terms of leadership models (Britton *et al.*, 2019a), models of training and deployment (Britton *et al.*, 2018), and even in terms of numbers, with a six-fold difference in numbers between the largest and smallest measured by ratio of Regular–Special Constables, or by the number of Special Constables per 100,000 population (Britton, 2020). This is in part a reflection of a comparatively unregulated environment compared with the Regular police service, with greater discretion at force level on key issues of ranks and leadership roles, role and specialization, and initial and ongoing training models and requirements. For example, a national survey of police forces (Britton *et al.*, 2018) revealed a five-fold difference in the number of days of initial training for Special Constables between different police forces. This scale of local variation in individual police forces presents challenges for any research which seeks to generalize across what are, in effect, very different local practice settings in individual police force areas.

Despite these challenges, this article provides a detailed overview of the perceptions of Regulars as part of a growing evidence base for police volunteering. Moreover, the results of the survey identify key areas for further research and enquiry.

Analytical procedure

Respondents were asked to score their agreement with a series of statements relating to their perceptions of the Special Constabulary, using a 6-point Likert scale (1: strongly agree, 2: agree, 3: somewhat agree, 4: somewhat disagree, 5: disagree, 6: strongly disagree). The individual scores were then aggregated whereby 1–3 were recorded as agree and 4–6 as disagree. The results from the different forces were synthesized and are presented in the subsequent section as 'Combined Results'. When exploring associations between different variables, analysis of results was conducted using Chi-square testing at the 95% confidence level ($P < 0.05$),

with Φ and Cramers V statistics being reported dependent on the number of categories within the variables for which a strength of association was being tested. The analysis explores the relationship between levels of agreement with perceptions of the Special Constabulary and gender, ethnicity, age, rank, force sites, length of service, and previous experience as a Special. These results are presented in the subsequent section as ‘Key factors’ found to be significantly associated and influential on perceptions.

Results

The results are organized into the following sections: 1. Response characteristics; 2. Combined results of officer responses; and 3. Factors associated with officer responses (including gender, ethnicity, age, rank, force sites, length of service, and previous experience as a special).

Response characteristics

Basic demographic results of the study response ($n=1,382$) are illustrated in Table 1. Approximately, three quarters of respondents were males ($n=948$, 76%) and the majority were White ($n=1,099$, 93%). This is reasonably representative of the general workforce (Home Office, 2019a), with national data showing 7 out of 10 police officers were males and 94% were White. A small proportion of the response were aged 29 years or under ($n=50$, 8%), 38% ($n=247$) were aged 30–39 years, 40% ($n=258$) were aged 40–49, and the remaining 15% ($n=97$) were over the age of 50 years. Again, comparing with national data, this is broadly representative with some slight over-representation of older age groups in the response. In respect of rank, 75% ($n=1,041$) of respondents were Constables, 18% ($n=243$) were Sergeants, and 7% ($n=98$) were Inspectors.

About a quarter of respondents ($n=335$, 24%) had been a police officer for 5 years or less, similarly 23% ($n=308$) had served 5–10 years, 23%

Table 1: Survey respondents

Question	<i>n</i> (%)
Gender ($n=1,256$)	
Female	298 (23.7)
Male	948 (75.5)
Non-binary	10 (0.8)
Ethnicity ($n=1,181$)	
Asian	24 (2.0)
Black	20 (1.7)
Mixed ethnicity	26 (2.2)
White	1,099 (93.1)
Other	12 (1.0)
Age ($n=652$)	
18–24	9 (1.4)
25–29	41 (6.3)
30–34	118 (18.1)
35–39	129 (19.8)
40–44	108 (16.6)
45–49	150 (23.0)
50–54	84 (12.9)
55–59	13 (2.0)
Rank ($n=1,382$)	
Constable	1,041 (75.3)
Sergeant	243 (17.6)
Inspector	98 (7.1)
Length of service ($n=1,382$), years	
≤5	335 (24.2)
>5–10	308 (22.3)
>10–15	322 (23.3)
>15–20	189 (13.7)
>20–25	127 (9.2)
>25	101 (7.3)

($n=322$) had served 10–15 years and 31% ($n=417$) had served more than 15 years. The response was over-representative of those that had served 10 years or less, with them representing 47% compared with 33% in the workforce as a whole.

The survey was conducted across four sites comprising five forces (‘Force A’ in the study was a combined study of two neighbouring police force areas). These forces ranged in size and type of location. The forces are not named in this article but will be described as Force A, Force B, Force C, and Force D. Force B constituted 51% ($n=704$) of the response, while Force A

constituted 24% ($n=326$), Force C constituted 4% ($n=54$), and Force D constituted 22% ($n=298$). Responses to questions were not mandatory and as such the number of respondents for all questions is not uniform.

Response rates were challenging to estimate because in the research sites distribution of the survey was focused by the forces on particular divisions rather than a full-force geography, and also because whole population figures for Regular officers, such as shown in national workforce statistics for police forces (Home Office, 2019a,b), do not reflect the 'available population' due to sizeable numbers of officers deployed to national, regional, and other specialist teams which were not reached by the survey, and other issues such as absence. Although it is not possible to calculate a figure for response rate, levels of response were potentially relatively low (ca. 10–25%), and variable between sites. These challenges both in calculating response rate and in raising the level of response flags and the need for caution in interpreting and generalizing findings, and the need to view this study as an exploratory pilot research project. The challenge of how to enhance engagement of Regular officers in research in the future, as the previous studies cited in the introduction to this article have also experienced challenges of low proportions of Regular officer engagement, remains a key one for future similar research fieldwork.

Combined results of officer responses to the survey

This section presents the combined results of all forces from the analysis relating to the following themes: recruitment, training, management and strategy, value and relationships, and scope. The results are presented in Table 2. It provides the overall responses of officers to these key themes and presents the varying level of agreement with statements related to each theme.

Recruitment. The results related to recruitment presented in Table 2 point to a degree of concern regarding the recruitment process of Specials. The relatively poor results show concern with both the recruitment process in terms of management and with the individuals who are being recruited into the Special Constabulary. For instance, about four-fifths and three-quarters, respectively, agreed that higher standards are needed to become a Special (82) and a more targeted recruitment of Specials is required (75%). Moreover, only 40% agreed that their force manages Specials well and likewise again only 40% agreed that Special Constables with the necessary life experience are recruited. Finally, around half of the response agreed that the 'right' people are recruited (49%), who have the right motivations and ambitions (61%).

Training. Levels of agreement with statements relating to training exposed further concerns about the provision and suitability of initial and ongoing training for Specials. Overall, only a small proportion of Regulars agreed that the training Specials receive enables them to feel confident to 'do it for real' (16%), that the training Specials receive covers all that it needs to (16%), and that they feel confident that Specials are provided adequate training and support to respond to incidents by themselves (16%). Only a quarter of the response agreed that the initial induction of Specials following training is managed well (24%) and about a fifth agreed that training provided to Specials enables them to provide a high level of service to the public and people in need (22%). In terms of ongoing training, only 21% agreed that Specials receive enough ongoing training opportunities to remain effective in their role and 23% agreed that the force sufficiently supports Specials to develop new skills and abilities.

Management and strategy. The results show that the perception of the management of Specials was poor with only a fifth agreeing that the force manages its Specials well (19%), while

Table 2: Full survey response

Key factor	Number	Agree (%)	Disagree (%)
Recruitment			
The force should set higher standards to become a Special	678	82	18
The force should have more targeted recruitment of Specials	1,382	75	25
I think the force manages the recruitment process for Specials well	1,081	40	60
The force recruits Specials who have the necessary life experience	1,251	40	60
I think the force recruits the right people to be Specials	1,214	49	51
The force recruits Specials who have the right motivations and ambitions	1,285	61	40
Training			
The training Specials receive enables Specials to feel confident to 'do it for real'	1,259	16	84
The training Specials receive covers all that it needs to	1,255	16	85
I feel confident that Specials are provided adequate training and support to respond to incidents by themselves	1,160	16	84
The initial induction of Specials following training is managed well	1,124	24	76
I think the training provided to Specials enables them to provide a high level of service to the public and people in need	1,382	22	78
Specials receive sufficient ongoing training opportunities to remain effective in their role	1,382	21	79
The force sufficiently supports Specials to develop new skills and abilities	1,382	23	78
Management and strategy			
The force manages its Specials well	1,382	19	81
The management and supervision of Specials needs to be improved	1,382	93	7
The force is getting better at managing its Specials	1,382	31	69
The team I work in manages Specials well	1,382	58	42
The team I work in is getting better at managing Specials	1,382	57	43
The force needs to change its strategy for the Special Constabulary	1,367	87	13
I understand the force's strategy for its Special Constabulary and what it wants to achieve	1,183	32	69
The force has the right strategy for its Special Constabulary	678	30	70
Value and relationships			
I consider myself to be a supporter of the Special Constabulary	1,382	86	14
I recognize the value of the work Specials do	1,382	83	17
I appreciate the support that Specials provide to me and my team	1,382	77	23
I speak positively about Specials to friends and family	678	76	24
I speak positively about Specials to colleagues	1,382	74	26
I think that Specials provide good value for money	1,382	69	31
Specials provide important capacity to help us do the job	1,382	62	38
I place as much trust in the work undertaken by Specials as I trust in work undertaken by Regular officers or PCSOs	1,382	32	69
Specials respect me and the work I do as a Regular officer/PCSO	1,126	91	9
I work well with the Specials I have direct contact with	1,127	84	16
The relationship between Specials and Regulars needs to be improved	1,382	88	12
I have a good understanding of what the Specials I work with are capable of doing	1,126	69	31
I have the opportunity to get to know the Specials I work with	1,126	63	37
Scope			
I think that Specials could do more	1,382	77	23
Better opportunities for Specials to contribute within the force need to be created	1,382	71	29
Specials should play a bigger role in policing	1,382	62	38
I would trust Specials with confidential and sensitive information	1,382	54	46
The force should increase the size of the Special Constabulary	1,382	53	47
I would be comfortable with Specials being involved in ongoing investigations	1,382	43	57
Specials should be involved more in specialist areas of policing	1,382	33	67

Table 3: Associations between age and response

Key factor	Statement	Overall (%)	34 or under (%)	35–39 (%)	40–44 (%)	45–49 (%)	50 and above (%)	X	df	P	Cramer's V
Training	The training Specialists receive enables Specialists to feel confident to 'do it for real'	16	11	15	27	33	33	35.006	4	0.000	0.232
Value and relationships	I speak positively about Specialists to colleagues	74	79	64	87	88	87	34.394	4	0.000	0.23
Training	The initial induction of Specialists following training is managed well	24	24	18	34	46	40	33.902	4	0.000	0.228
Value and relationships	I place as much trust in the work undertaken by Specialists as I trust in work undertaken by Regular officers or PCSOs	32	22	19	42	39	42	30.279	4	0.000	0.215
Training	I feel confident that Specialists are provided adequate training and support to respond to incidents by themselves	16	11	10	23	30	25	29.034	4	0.000	0.211
Value and relationships	I speak positively about Specialists to friends and family	76	74	62	85	86	80	28.81	4	0.000	0.21

most agreed that the management and supervision of Specialists need to be improved (93%). However, only around a third of the respondents agreed that their force is getting better at managing Specialists (31%), with a little over a half agreeing that the team that they work in manages Specialists well (58%) and that the team that they work in is getting better at managing Specialists (57%). Most Regulars agreed that their force needs to change the strategy for the Special Constabulary (87%), only about a third agree that they understand the force's strategy and what it wants to achieve (32%) and feel that the force has the right strategy for its Special Constabulary (30%).

Value and relationships. Although many of the results presented above are highly critical of the recruitment, training, management, and strategy of the Special Constabulary, most Regulars considered themselves to be supportive of the Special Constabulary (86%), recognized the value of the work Specialists do (83%), and appreciated the

support they provide to them and their team (77%). About three-quarters of Regulars responded that they speak positively about Specialists to friends and family (76%) and to colleagues (74%). A lower proportion, but still a majority, of Regular respondents agreed that Specialists provide good value for money (69%) and give important capacity to help them 'do the job' (62%). Only a third agreed that they trust in the work undertaken by Specialists as they trust in work undertaken by other Regulars or PCSOs (32%).

Most Regulars agreed that Specialists respect them and the work they do (91%) and that they work well with Specialists they have direct contact with (84%). However, most agreed that the relationship between Specialists and Regulars needs to be improved (88%). In addition, only about two-thirds agreed that they have a good understanding of what the Specialists they work with can do (69%) and that they have the opportunity to get to know the Specialists they work with (63%).

Table 4: Associations between rank and response

Key factor	Statement	Overall (%)	Constable (%)	Sergeant (%)	Inspector (%)	X	df	P
Scope	Specials should be involved more in specialist areas of policing	33	30	33	59	34.052	2	0.00
Scope	I would be comfortable with Specials being involved in ongoing investigations	43	41	41	69	30.909	2	0.00
Value and relationships	I speak positively about Specials to colleagues	74	71	80	94	29.532	2	0.00
Training	The training Specials receive enables Specials to feel confident to 'do it for real'	16	14	19	33	24.745	2	0.00
Management and strategy	The team I work in is getting better at managing Specials	57	54	60	80	24.532	2	0.00
Value and relationships	Specials provide important capacity to help us do the job	62	60	63	84	22.353	2	0.00

Scope of the special constable role. The results relating to the scope of Specials in their role showed support for expansion of role profiles. Around three-quarters agreed that Specials could do more (77%) and that better opportunities for Specials to contribute within the force need to be created (71%), with almost two-thirds agreeing that Specials should play a bigger role in policing (62%). However, there were lower levels of agreement that they would trust Specials with confidential and sensitive information (54%), the force should increase the size of the Special Constabulary (53%), they would feel comfortable with Specials being involved in ongoing investigations (43%), and Specials should be involved in more specialist areas of policing (33%).

Factors associated with officer responses

This section examines the relationships between Regular officer responses and the following factors: gender, ethnicity, age, rank, force sites, length of service, and previous experience as a Special Constable.

Gender. There were no significant relationships between the statements and gender.

Ethnicity. Because of the numbers it was only possible to compare White participants ($n=1,099$) with all ethnic minority participants ($n=82$). There was only one association found between ethnicity and the statements and this association was weak. White participants were more likely to agree with the statement 'Better opportunities for Specials to contribute within the force need to be created' compared with participants from minority ethnic backgrounds, 74% compared with 63%.

Age. As reflected in Table 3 a majority of responses—29 of the 41 statements—had an association with age, with those who were younger tending to be more negative. For example, 11% of those aged 34 years and under and 15% of those aged 35–39 years agreed that the training Specials receive enables them to feel confident to 'do it for real' compared with 27% of 40–44 years old, 33% of 45–49 years old, and 33% of those aged 50 years and above.

Rank. Rank was found to have a weak but significant association to statements in all themes within the survey. Table 4 illustrates how as rank increased, attitudes towards the Specials and the

Table 5: Associations between force and response

Key factor	Statement	Overall (%)	Force A (%)	Force B (%)	Force C (%)	Force D (%)	X	df	P
Training	The training Specialists receive covers all that it needs to	16	23	16	41	8	63.250	3	0.00
Recruitment	I think that the force manages the recruitment process for Specialists well	40	45	49	63	26	58.102	3	0.00
Recruitment	I think that the force recruits the right people to be Specialists	49	59	56	65	37	55.650	3	0.00
Training	The training Specialists receive enables Specialists to feel confident to 'do it for real'	16	23	18	39	9	54.514	3	0.00
Training	The initial induction of Specialists following training is managed well	24	32	28	41	14	48.960	3	0.00
Value and relationships	I appreciate the support that Specialists provide to me and my team	77	86	82	89	69	47.05	3	0.000

wider Special Constabulary improved. For example, Inspectors were more likely than Sergeants and Constables to agree that Specialists should be involved more in specialist areas of policing, with 59% of Inspectors agreeing, compared with 33% of Sergeants and 30% of Constables. Also, Inspectors were more comfortable with Specialists being involved in ongoing investigations. Therefore, the respective rank of Officers appears to have an effect on attitudes towards the capabilities of Specialists and what they should be involved with in the future. These findings resonate with a long history of literature on police cultures which has recognized the importance of role differentiation and rank (Niederhoffer, 1969; Chan, 1997).

Force sites. Significant differences were identified in the analysis relating to force sites, the strongest of which are presented in Table 5, illustrating how different thematic issues were viewed depending upon each force site. For instance, the results for Force D are substantially less positive compared with other sites, illustrating how the response of Regular officers in that force reflected poorer views of the recruitment, training, and value of Specialists, as well as the relationship

between Regulars and Specialists. Force C appears to have the most positive results in terms of perceptions. The results presented in Table 5 illustrates that differences between responses in different forces were substantial.

It is worth noting, however, that no significant differences across forces were identified in the proportions of Regulars that agreed that the management and supervision of Specialists needs to be improved, being high across all forces. Similarly, there was no significant differences in the proportions that agreed that the force manages its Specialists well, being low across all forces.

Compared with other factors associating with responses, differences based upon force sites appeared to have the strongest effect on the results, perhaps reflective of the localized structures and control of Special Constabularies based on local police force areas, and cautioning against generalizability from single site studies. Force C had the most extensive programme of initial training in terms of days, and Forces B and D the least, which does fit with the pattern of Regular officer responses in respect of confidence in training, and confidence to practice. Force C also had a model of directly involving Regular officers in induction

Table 6: Associations between length of service and response

Key factor	Statement	Overall (%)	5 years or less (%)	More than 5–10 years (%)	More than 10–15 years (%)	More than 15 years (%)	X	df	P
Training	The training Specials receive enables Specials to feel confident to 'do it for real'	16	11	9	16	24	34.067	3	0.00
Value and relationships	I speak positively about Specials to colleagues	74	81	69	66	79	30.272	3	0.00
Scope	I would trust Specials with confidential and sensitive information	54	67	49	47	53	31.276	3	0.00
Scope	Specials should play a bigger role in policing	62	73	52	62	60	28.817	3	0.00
Value and relationships	I speak positively about Specials to friends and family	76	87	71	66	85	28.436	3	0.00
Training	The training Specials receive covers all that it needs to	16	12	9	16	23	27.402	3	0.00

Table 7: Associations between having previously been a special constable and response

Key factor	Statement	Overall (%)	Not special (%)	Special (%)	X	Df (%)	P (%)	Φ (%)
Value and relationships	I consider myself to be a supporter of the Special Constabulary	86	81	97	58.94	100	0	21
Value and relationships	I speak positively about Specials to colleagues	74	70	88	46.64	100	0	19
support	I enjoy supporting Specials to develop their skills	79	75	91	32.94	100	0	17
Scope	Specials should play a bigger role in policing	62	57	75	34.90	100	0	16
Scope	Better opportunities for Specials to contribute within the force need to be created	71	67	83	34.58	100	0	16
Scope	The force should increase the size of the Special Constabulary	53	48	66	33.16	100	0	16

training, and also in a more structured manner in initial practice field training. Force C also was the only force without a component of online, remote learning in Special Constable initial training at the time the surveys were completed. It is not possible to directly infer from this study that those factors shaped the large variations in Regular officer perspectives and confidence, but they prompt areas that would justify further exploration. There may also be some relationship worthy of further

exploration between force size and Regular officer confidence; this study is suggestive that the smaller forces involved in this study exhibit more positive responses, but considerable caution should be exercised in that given low number of forces and differential scales of response. Force D had a model of Special Constabulary which is less extensive and ambitious in Special Constable role and deployment. Again, it is possible that might reflect in a lower proportion of Regular officers

appreciating the contribution of their Special Constable colleagues in that force compared with the other three sites in the study. Force D had also seen disinvestment in support structures for the Special Constabulary in the period preceding the survey being undertaken, and Force C and one of the forces comprising Force A had seen significant recent additional investment in support staff and budget; it may be these different patterns reflect to some degree in the results.

Length of service. Length of service as shown in [Table 6](#) was found to have a significant effect on Regular officer perspectives, with those officers who were newly qualified and those with established careers (i.e. over 15 years' service) being the most positive. In almost all cases (except one), more than 15 years group were most positive of all, and, in all cases, those having served 5–10 years were least positive.

Previous experience as a special constable. Previous experiences as a Special, as reflected in [Table 7](#), were found to have a significant effect on Regular officer perspectives, with those having been Specials being more positive. The strongest associations were for the perceptions of 'value and relationship' statements, for example, 97% of ex-Specials agreed that they consider themselves supporters of the Special Constabulary compared with 81% of those who had not served as Specials. There were also strong associations for the 'scope' statements, for example, 75% of former Specials agreed that the Special Constabulary should play a bigger role in policing compared with 57% of those who had not previously served in the Special Constabulary.

Discussion

Previous research has highlighted the degree of variation across Special Constabulary models in different police forces in England and Wales ([Britton et al., 2016b](#); [Britton et al., 2018](#)). This

study is the first fieldwork for almost 2 decades in England and Wales to engage with Regular perspectives of Special Constables at-scale and across multiple force sites, and in terms of participant numbers it represents the largest such study ever undertaken. Nevertheless, the study remains exploratory in nature, piloting the methodologies concerned, weakened by challenges in response volumes, and only engaging with Regular officers from five police forces.

The findings reflect considerable variation between the force sites. Therefore, caution should be exercised in the degree of generalizability to all police forces nationally, albeit findings may be indicative of areas for consideration for policy and practice development and may help signal future areas of interest for further research. The extent of variation between the force sites in this study suggests that future research work should be highly cognisant of the potential degree of variation between force contexts. Previous studies have not identified this issue of local variation in findings ([Leon, 1991](#); [Gaston and Alexander, 2001](#); [Phillips and Terrell-Orr, 2013](#)), but in terms of the findings in this study it appears significant.

The findings point to significant patterns of variation within the Regular officer responses, and suggest caution against approaches that suggest a singular and homogeneous 'Regular culture' in respect of Special Constables, reflecting [Reiner \(2010, p. 132\)](#) who argues more broadly in respect of police culture that it should not be portrayed as 'monolithic, universal, or unchanging'. assume a singular, stable or homogeneous picture, instead prompting. The findings in this study prompt the need for sensitivity in respect of such factors as age and service, gender, rank, and previous experience as a Special Constable. [Waddington \(1999\)](#) identified the potential of a 'near infinity' of sub-cultures in policing, and [Cockcroft \(2013, p. 79\)](#) argues that research into police occupational culture has historically 'largely downplayed the scope for variation'. Although these sensitivities to variation in culture are important, there were across

the results of this study evidence of what Loftus (2008, p. 757) refers to as 'dominant narratives' and 'prevailing accents', and it is important to balance an engagement with difference and complexity of Regular officer cultures towards Special Constables, with a recognition that there also appear to be some overarching cultural patterns in Regular officer thinking.

Only one study in England and Wales (Gill and Mawby, 1990) and one in the USA, which specifically focused on supervisory ranks (Phillips and Terrell-Orr, 2013) have findings in terms of the variation within Regular officer cohort perspectives on volunteer police. This study builds significantly on that work, and demonstrates the value of differentiated and nuanced understandings of Regular officer culture and perspectives, which in turn should contribute to more sophisticated and tailored practical models of engagement and enhancement of participation by police forces in respect of Regular officers and the Special Constabulary.

Looking across the findings, most Regular officers participating in the surveys considered themselves supportive, valuing the work of their Special colleagues, and appreciating the support they provide. This support among a majority of Regular officers should be recognized and positively engaged by police forces as an asset in delivering future growth and development of the Special Constabulary. Future research could usefully build on these positive aspects of response in this study and should look to develop greater understandings of what drives positive and appreciative elements of Regular officer perspectives. The wider literature on police culture has on the whole long had a tendency towards foregrounding a problematizing in respect of perceived negative aspects, rather than appreciation and building upon perceived cultural positives, particularly conceptualizing police culture as a barrier to change (Paoline, 2003; Loftus, 2010). Cockcroft (2013, p. 119–145) framed a whole chapter on 'Managing police culture' in respect of 'negative behaviour, corruption,

and absenteeism' and how 'cultural orientations may provide barriers to effective police reform' (2013, p. 119), reflecting what Dean (1995, p. 346) described as a viewpoint of the 'potency' of police culture to 'subvert, deflect and distort' reform. Although there are indeed some significantly challenging aspects of Regular officer culture revealed through this study, there are also constructive, supportive, valuing cultural sentiments to be built upon. Looking across the variation in results across this study between police forces, the force with the most positive sentiment was the one which had recently and pro-actively sought to better directly involve Regular officers, including a relatively new and strongly integrative model of the management of Special Constables within policing teams. The force with the least evidence of positive, supportive culture was a large police force area with little force-level communication or engagement with its Regular officers in respect of the Special Constabulary.

However, juxtaposed with such generally positive sentiments of support for the contribution of Specials, Regular respondents in the surveys were also critical of force approach, strategy, and leadership. These broader strategic aspects in relation to force direction and approach to the Special Constabulary have been little engaged in previous work, and the findings of this study are thus of particular interest given that this has previously been little covered ground from a research perspective. Two-thirds of responses indicated little faith in, or understanding of, the current strategy of their force for the Special Constabulary. Although the earlier research of Leon (1991) did not cover these areas in the detail that this study has, her work did produce similar findings, contrasting a general support for Special Constables and recognition of value of the Special Constabulary against a greater negativity and scepticism towards aspects of management at force level. The findings of this study suggest that there is a confidence gap for a majority of Regular officers in respect of the future strategy of their police

force in respect of the Special Constabulary. Enhanced engagement of Regular officers in developing vision and strategic direction might aid a strengthening of confidence, which in turn will likely build cultural 'buy in' for the future strategic direction.

The negative perceptions and concerns indicated in many responses by Regular officers who participated in the research about the recruitment, training provision, and practice competency for Specials is highly resonant with research which has engaged the perspectives of Specials themselves. The adequacy of initial training to prepare Specials for practice has been consistently challenged across the literature (Gill, 1986; Gill and Mawby, 1990; Leon, 1991; Mirrlees-Black and Byron, 1994; NPIA, 2010; Whittle, 2014; Bullock and Leeney, 2016; Britton *et al.*, 2016a; Callender *et al.*, 2018b,c). The scepticism of Regular officers in this study towards the recruitment and the training of Special Constables reflects confidence gaps in respect of professionalism, safety, and capability that deserve serious engagement by police forces. Previous research (Britton *et al.*, 2018) has identified inconsistency of approach between forces, and in some respects also within individual forces, with only a very limited national framework in respect of training and standards for Special Constabularies. There is as a result wide variation, for example, in length and coverage of initial training, rigour of ongoing professional assessment, and extent of continuing professional development. Such a dearth of national standards and lack of a common approach is in contrast to many other aspects of policing, in particular relating to similar aspects of initial and ongoing training for Regular officers. This picture of little regulated, and highly variable, local approaches may well play a part in feeding into the confidence gaps seen in this research for Regular officers in respect of the degree of professionalization of their local Special Constabularies.

In terms of the supervision and support available for Specials, a very high proportion of

Regulars, over 9 in 10, felt that the supervision of Specials needs to be improved. These negative perceptions about management and leadership were consistent across the force sites in the study. This appears to indicate a consistency and consensus in perspectives that the management of Specials is perceived by Regular officers as being in need of improvement. These findings need to be considered within wider discussion of leadership and management in policing in England and Wales, which has experienced greater attention in recent years following the Neyroud Review (Neyroud, 2011) and the 'professionalization' agenda being led by the College of Policing through the 'Police Education Qualification Framework' (Heslop, 2011; Neyroud, 2011; Ramshaw and Soppitt, 2018). This period of scrutiny over the education and qualifications of police officers has created many as yet unanswered questions about the future of the Special Constabulary, and may create further concern amongst Regular officers. Recent research into Special Constabulary leadership (Britton *et al.*, 2019a) paints a highly variable and somewhat confused strategic and frontline picture of Special Constabulary leadership, identifying a number of key problems in respect of standards and consistency.

The findings reveal a mixed picture across Regular officer responses in their consideration of the scope and contribution of the Special Constable role. This study represents the first time that considerations of specialism in the Special Constabulary have been engaged in research of Regular officer perspectives of the Special Constabulary. A high proportion of Regulars in this study was supportive of Specials playing a bigger role in policing and that better opportunities should be created for Specials to contribute. However, the findings also suggest that Regulars felt less comfortable with Specials being involved in ongoing investigations and in being more involved in specialist areas of policing. On the ground across police forces, there is a quite significant growth in Special Constables operating in

specialist roles (Britton *et al.*, 2019b). There is a stated aim of the *Special Constabulary National Strategy 2018/2023* (NPCC, 2018) of identifying and maximizing ‘those opportunities for the Special Constabulary to make a direct contribution, especially in more specialist areas of policing’. Further research to better understand the concerns of Regulars towards the development of Specials into specialist roles would be timely, given this apparent disconnection between the perspective of Regulars and the direction of current policy and practice.

Conclusion

Future changes in policy and practice within police forces in respect of their Special Constabularies need to foreground the positive elements of these findings, recognizing the asset that police forces have of positive Regular officer sentiments and perspectives of value, and cultural front-line support for expansion of role and contribution, to help further foster thriving relationships between Regulars and Specials. Police forces may perhaps be more attuned to recognizing and engaging with negative cultural and perceptual elements in the police workforce in respect of Special Constables, but may be less aware of, or adept at engaging with, more appreciative and supportive cultural dimensions which from this research appear to be strong. Police forces should give more thought not only to how further to build such supportive Regular officer cultural perspectives, but also in how to recognize and reward those many Regular officers who are positive and engaged with Specials, and how to better enable those Regular officers in translating those positive perspectives into tangible actions that lead to support, integration, deployment, and experience improvements for Specials.

This research also identifies some significant challenges for police forces in achieving the full confidence of Regular officers in their force’s Special Constabularies. There is a confidence gap in respect

of the strategy of police forces towards Specials, with Regular officers appearing to lack knowledge and understanding of force vision, direction, and strategy, and to be sceptical towards how effective current strategies are. There are also gaps in confidence in key practical policing terms, in respect of recruitment standards, training, competency, and support. This research does not evidence particular solutions to closing these gaps in confidence. It may be that some elements of these confidence gaps may stem from basic issues of communication and involvement; that Regular officers are unaware or poorly informed about elements of the Special Constabulary and would be more positive if they were better briefed or were more involved. There is potentially a role for leaders in police forces of ‘championing’ the role, capability, and contribution of Specials more pro-actively, and there is potentially also a need for a more active managerial engagement with elements of negativity or resistance within forces in respect of Specials, especially where these exist in Regular officer supervisory ranks. Clearly, there also appear to be fundamental practical challenges in terms of standards, competency, and support that need to see improvement, to help build Regular officer confidence.

The research points to the critical importance of the active involvement of Regular officers. Future strategic developments to enhance the experience and role of Specials, to further professionalize, to better integrate, and to build the contribution of Special Constables, are all dependent on involving Regular officers more in the design, development, delivery, and support of Special Constabularies.

One key challenge of wider context raised in policing is the need to significantly expand recruitment into the Special Constabulary, fuelled also by the recent Home Office announcement for a ‘20,000 police officer uplift’ (Home Office, 2019b) which will likely recruit from the existing Special Constabulary. Both the headcount of Special Constables and levels of recruitment are at historic lows (Britton, 2018), and to restore the Special Constabulary cohort to the size it has been within

the past 5–6 years would require a major upscaling in the volume of recruitment. However, the findings of this research suggest significant confidence gaps for Regular officers in terms of standards of selection, suitability, and life experience of current Specials recruits. Police forces intending to significantly expand their recruitment will need to be mindful not only of the need to build numbers but also to address these concerns of Regular officers. Several strategies might be considered by forces to achieve this. Enhanced and more pro-active attraction and marketing approaches may help build numbers of applicants and thus allow greater selectivity, and might also help attract a broader pool of applicants, including more who have greater life experience or who bring specific skill sets. A greater involvement of Regulars in recruiting Specials and setting standards and expectations, alongside supporting Regulars to be better informed about the rigour of selection processes, may be helpful in providing a greater assurance to address Regular officer concerns (Britton and Knight, 2019).

Engaging Regular officers and understanding and addressing their perspectives and concerns are fundamental to wider initiatives to expand the ‘policy family’ of roles and contributions across policing, and more specifically such engagement is critical to realizing the potential ambition, scope and contribution of the Special Constabulary in a future, fast-changing, police environment. This small explorative study has begun to address this under-researched and underdeveloped aspect of policy and practice, but future strategic and operational development of the Special Constabulary role requires both a much greater understanding of Regular officer culture and perspectives, and a much more engaged and participative model for Regular officers in developing the future of Special Constabularies.

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