Police Journal:
Theory, Practice and Principles

Special beginnings: An explorative study of the early career experiences of volunteer special constables

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Abstract
The paper reports on a study of the early career experiences of voluntary Special Constables. The research identified the importance of practising, becoming and belonging for volunteers during initial training. Significant challenges in their early front-line practice were experienced alongside problems of processes, management, and organisation, and cultural challenges in terms of 'fitting in' and building relationships. The paper argues for the need to further professionalise police force approaches to new Special Constables and the need to shift away from a 'finding their own way' paradigm for new volunteer officers towards a structured, unified pathway of development.

Keywords
Special constable, police, volunteer, training

Introduction

Each police force in England and Wales has a Special Constabulary, comprising part-time, volunteer police officers who share the same 'warranted' sworn powers of their regular,

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paid police officer colleagues and who undertake similar front-line policing duties. This voluntary activity is undertaken on a sizeable scale, involving 9174 Specials in March 2021 (Home Office, 2021), and Special Constables contributing 3.2 million hours of voluntary policing service in 2017 (Britton et al., 2018a). This paper focuses on the early experience of newly joined volunteer Special Constables. Every year there are an estimated 16,500 applications to become a Special Constable in England and Wales (Britton et al., 2016b), and over a decade just over 45,000 individuals will have joined up with the Special Constabulary, averaging 4500 per year (Britton, 2018a).

There is a small but growing body of research internationally into the experiences of volunteer police (Alexander, 2000; Britton, 2017; Britton et al., 2018b; Bullock and Leeney, 2016; Callender, Cahalin and Britton, 2018; Callender, Cahalin and Cole, 2018; Dickson, 2021; Gaston and Alexander, 2001; Hieke, 2015; NPIA, 2010; Pepper, 2014; Pepper and Wolf, 2015; Prins, 2018; van Steden and Mehlbaum, 2019; Whittle, 2014; Wolf et al., 2015, 2016). Of the studies which have undertaken interviews or direct observation engaging Special Constables in England and Wales, most such studies are now somewhat dated, including Gill (1986), Leon (1991), Mirrlees-Black and Byron (1994) and Hedges (2000), or have been small in scale (cf. Dickson, 2021; Millie, 2019). The work of Ramshaw and Cosgrove (2019) represents the only other recently published, larger-scale, interview-based study of Special Constables. None of the previous research studies of Special Constables in England and Wales have focused exclusively (Britton, 2017) or primarily on the early career experiences of new volunteers. This small-scale, explorative study seeks to contribute to the field through providing a depth of insight focused upon the early, 'beginning' experiences of becoming a Special Constable.

Although the growing literature on Special Constable experience has not specifically focused on early experience, several studies have recognised the importance of perceived problems of training and early practice experience. Bullock and Leeney (2016: 492) suggest: 'Training is a prominent theme within research on the Special Constabulary'. A sense of the insufficiency of extent of initial training and the degree to which it does not prepare adequately for initial practice has been a consistent theme across the literature (Bullock and Leeney, 2016; Gill, 1986; Leon, 1991; Mirrlees-Black and Byron, 1994; NPIA, 2010; Prins, 2018; Whittle, 2014; Wolf et al., 2016). Gill (1986: 215) found that only half of Special Constables felt their training adequately prepared them for police duties. Across the different force samples in their study, Mirrlees-Black and Byron (1994) found only between one third and two thirds of Specials saw their training as having prepared them for the situations that they were likely to encounter. Gaston and Alexander (2001: 62) identified almost a quarter of Specials were dissatisfied or very dissatisfied with the training that they had received. Whittle (2014) identified that Special Constables often felt 'insufficiently prepared', a sentiment echoed in the study by Prins (2018 :54) who identified that Special Constables 'spoke passionately about how unprepared their training left them to begin life on the streets as fully warranted officers.' In addition to the views of Special Constables themselves, Leon (1991) found that 80% of regular officers in her study also felt that the training provided to Special Constables was 'inadequate', findings echoed in a later survey-based study of regular officer perspectives of Special Constables (Britton et al., 2021), which found only 16% of regular officers felt that

Special Constabulary training was 'adequate'. Several studies have made the connection between training and the confidence to practice of Special Constables (Bullock and Leeney, 2016; Gaston and Alexander 2001; Prins, 2018; Wolf et al. 2016). Hieke (2015) identifies the association between 'connectedness', training and organisational support. Gaston and Alexander (2001: 62) found that 17% of former Specials associated 'lack of training' with their decisions to leave. Callender et al. (2018a) found that Special Constables who described their morale as not being good also responded negatively that they had not 'received the training required to be effective when I began my volunteering role'. Whittle (2014) in particular identifies the challenge of the 'gap' between academy and practice.

Previous studies also reflect the particular importance to Special Constables of forming positive, valuing, trusting, constructive relationships with regular officer colleagues (Britton et al., 2018b; Cheah et al., 2021; Gaston and Alexander, 2001; Gill and Mawby, 1990; Leon, 1991; Mirrlees-Black and Byron, 1994; NPIA, 2010; Prins, 2018). Several studies also identify challenges within these relationships. Gill and Mawby (1990) identified cultural negativity amongst regulars towards Specials, suggesting there to be 'a caucus of scepticism' (1990: 135) and identified the 'precarious' cultural position occupied by Special Constables, which at times they argued led to Special Constables over-identifying with the culture of 'regular' officers. Leon (1991) similarly identified 'hostility'. As Bullock and Leeney (2016: 494) argue, 'a recurring theme in the extant literature is that regular officers are sceptical of the Special Constabulary and its officers are not well integrated into regular constabularies.' It is posited that much of the critical origins of these relationships lie in the formative stages of early career contacts between regular officers and Special Constables.

Methodology

The research comprised a small-scale, qualitative study based upon interviews with Special Constables across two neighbouring police forces in England, encompassing thirty-four interviews in total, twenty-six from force area A, and eight from force area B. Force A is approximately twice the size of force B, in part explaining the unequal number of participants. The selection of the two police force sites partly reflected practicalities of access and attaining police force organisational support for the study. There is widespread variation across Special Constabularies in England and Wales, and therefore the two police force sites studied should not be considered as 'typical' of other Special Constabularies.

Special Constables were approached to participate by the police forces on behalf of the research team. Participants were identified to achieve a broad mix in terms of the geography of the two police force areas, gender and age. Given the small number of participants in the study, the methodology does not support any analysis of sub-groups or comparisons between them within the participants. The participants were split approximately half and half in respect of whether they had a motivation to join in the future as regular, paid police officers, which represents a slight over-representation of Special Constables with longer volunteer career aspirations compared to the cohort of Special

Constables in the two forces as a whole. There was only one Black and Ethnic Minority (BAME) Special Constable participant, but this is reflective of the very small proportion of BAME officers in the Special Constable cohorts in the two forces as a whole. Eight participants were female, which was broadly reflective of the female representation in the Special Constabularies concerned.

The semi-structured interviews allowed flexibility to cover a range of ground in respect of early Special Constabulary experience and sought to be non-directive to allow Special Constable participants themselves the opportunity to foreground and develop issues and areas of discussion.

The interviews with Special Constable participants lasted approximately an hour and were transcribed verbatim. The data from the interviews were then analysed thematically, following Alexander, 2000; Braun and Clarke, 2006 six steps of 'familiarisation' through reading transcripts, 'code generation', theme identification', 'review' of themes and codes, 'labelling themes' and 'report writing'.

Findings

Four broad themes were identified through the analysis: (i) Special Constables desiring changes to scope and focus of initial training, involving dimensions of practising, becoming and belonging; (ii) the significant challenges of early practice and integration; (iii) problems of process and of organisation and; (iv) the challenges experienced by Specials in 'fitting in' and building relationships.

Desired changes to scope and focus of initial training: Practising, becoming, belonging

A theme across the interviews was of Special Constables seeking changes to the focus and scope of their initial training experience. Special Constables sought a greater emphasis on practical training, with a focus on being more specifically prepared for the real-life situations and tasks that they would experience. They also wished to see a broadening of initial training to more clearly encompass aspects of belonging within the police organisation and more emphasis on the wider sense of becoming a police officer, including aspects of developing identity and engaging tradition, discipline, values and culture of the policing organisation.

Consistent with the findings of several previous studies (Britton et al., 2016a; Callender et al., 2018a; Mirrlees-Black and Byron, 1994; Whittle, 2014), the Special Constables in this study personally experienced the training curriculum and quality of delivery of training positively but felt that it had some deficiencies of content and coverage (Bullock and Leeney, 2016; Gill, 1986; Leon, 1991; Mirrlees-Black and Byron, 1994; NPIA, 2010; Whittle, 2014; Wolf et al., 2016). Although the training provided in the police forces to Special Constables in this study mirrored much of the content of that provided to regular officers, the quantity of training time available and therefore degree and depth of coverage was less than half that of regular colleagues. There was recognition through the interviews of the natural tensions between the constraints on time available to

train volunteers, and desires to replicate much of a regular police officer initial training curriculum, which is delivered with considerably more time available.

> *'There was a lot [of training], not what Regs get but they're full-time and it is obviously never going to be the same, that's just not possible.'* (A2)

> *'We should have the same [training], anything less risks credibility as police officers.'* (A14)

One aspect where there was much greater consensus across interviews was in the critique of training giving insufficient opportunity to 'put into practice' and to 'learn through doing'. The Special Constables in this study primarily frame their perceptions of training shortcomings in these specific terms of an inadequacy of 'practical' training. The training was perceived to cover 'legal', 'definitional', 'knowledge' elements quite well but to be much less strong in covering 'practical', 'applied', 'real', 'craft' elements of policing.

> *'[I recognise] a difference between training and actually doing it in real life but I think there should be more training on certain practical aspects of the job.'* (B8)

The findings in this research focusing on the gaps in practical training sit consistently with findings of several previous studies. Gill (1996: 216) identified in respect of Special Constabulary training a 'tendency to be factual or theoretical… at the expense of a practical orientation.' Bullock and Leeney (2016) identify 'insufficient detail…on the practical matters that special constables find themselves dealing with.' Callender et al. (2018a), in a national survey of Special Constables, found a very high proportion of Specials (93%) would have liked there to have been more practical sessions during their training. Prins (2019:54) identified newly trained Special Constables to have a 'lack of knowledge around the administrative side of policing'.

The Special Constables identified a sense of deficiencies in training which ranged much more broadly than the aspects of sufficiency of content and practical preparation primarily focused upon in previous studies. There were perceptions of a need for the role of initial training to go beyond covering curriculum and practice, to engage the 'tradition', 'discipline', 'values', 'ethos' and 'culture' of the policing organisation. Some of the Special Constables saw the initial training as being weak at initiating a sense of 'becoming' a police officer, 'assimilation' into the police organisation, and 'gaining membership'. That there were important dimensions to becoming a police officer, 'bigger than knowing things, learning to do things'.

> *'Our training covered a lot and it was really, really good… It's that whole, learning to do what cops do, great. Learning how to be a cop, to fill that uniform. A police officer, joining the police. Learnt that myself.'* (A13)

Special Constables reflected on their desire for a sense of 'belonging'. This appeared in large part to reflect desires for more emphasis to be placed in the initial training phase on

becoming 'part of it'. That they felt that initial training experiences were not 'engaging enough' with the force more widely and didn't 'step outside' or 'get out of the classroom' enough, that they didn't 'get us out in stations earlier' and 'meeting people', 'being part of it all'. In some cases, this was compounded by arrangements which were meant to have been in place, but commonly were not, for leads in stations to retain contact and build relationship during the initial training phase with Special Constables who were to be assigned to those stations post-training. This dimension is little developed in much of the previous literature on Special Constabulary training, although it does reflect and build upon the earlier observations of the study by Gill (1996: 218) which speaks of the importance for new Special Constable recruits of contacts with regular officers where 'values could be transmitted', which 'helped to provide a sense of identity with the service', and which served 'to inculcate the norms and values of the service which underpin police work.' (1996: 219).

A related point, not developed in the previous literature on Special Constabulary training but reflected upon by several Special Constables in the interviews in this study, appertained to the 'segregation' of Special Constables and regulars during initial training.

> 'They talk all the time, literally all the time about being one police force, we're all police officers we're told, but we never saw sight of any of the Regs right through training.' (A10)

Overall, whilst the Special Constables raise issues of sufficiency of training content and coverage, this study provides new insight into the other key aspects of 'inadequacy' that they perceive in terms of their initial training experience: elements relating to better delivering practical learning and focussing on supporting preparation for front-line practice, and the importance for volunteer officers in 'becoming' police officers and having a sense of 'belonging' in the wider policing organisation.

The significant challenges of early practice and integration

It is clear from the findings of this research that the point at which Special Constables commence their practice on the front-line – 'doing it for real' – is often experienced as being highly challenging. In terms of the 'leap' from knowledge-learning to real-life delivery, and the 'major shift in pace' of learning and level of personal and professional challenge, alongside traumatic and challenging contexts and activity that new Special Constables are exposed to, often very early in their front-line experience.

This theme of the challenge of early practice, and how well prepared and supported Specials are for it, is seen in several earlier studies (cf. Mirrlees-Black and Byron, 1994; Whittle, 2014; Prins, 2018). Gaston and Alexander (2001: 69) cited one participant in their study who talked of being 'thrown into the deep-end and told to get on with it', a sentiment reflected in this study.

Mirrlees-Black and Byron (1994: v) argued that 'however good the initial training, putting on a uniform and patrolling the streets can present a new set of problems and experiences'. The intrinsic nature of the challenges of this point in the Special Constable

journey is similarly reflected by the Special Constables in this study, being recognised as 'natural' and 'unavoidable'.

The language used across interviews is striking: of a 'cliff-edge moment'; 'I grew up as a police officer in one night'; 'reality hits'; 'overwhelming'; 'pace'; 'whirl'; 'shock' 'jolt'; 'the blood on the pavement, sick on the boots'. Not all reflections on the first experience are negative by any means: 'excitement at the reality'; 'what I'd been waiting for, and it didn't disappoint'. However, there are reflections from some that their first or early front-line experiences lacked being 'controlled' or 'tailored'; that the management of early shifts for some was seen as being 'careless' as to what was experienced, often meaning new volunteer officers being 'thrown into whatever you happen to be thrown into.'

Part of the early experience for many Special Constables is exposure to quite traumatic contexts. It is evident from the interviews that sometimes these traumatic events occur very early on in their policing experience, on occasions on their first shifts, and that the effects appear not to always be recognised or particularly well managed by the wider police organisation.

> 'I know talking to some people off my course, you know, they've gone out for the first time and then they were like, whoa, you know, straight into a violent domestic. And to me that's letting the officer down.' (A13)

There is only a limited literature on trauma and wellbeing in relation to Special Constables (Britton, 2017; Britton and Knight, 2021; Hieke, 2018). Britton (2017), in a national survey of Special Constables focused on representation, support and wellbeing, identified a mixed picture in terms of perspectives on current support available for Special Constables, in which there were a sizeable number of Specials who had concerns about levels of support and uncertainties about accessing it. Slightly over a third of participants in that study disagreed that 'adequate support is provided to Specials who have had distressing experiences'. Hieke (2018) identified the impact of operational duties on Special Constables, identifying experience of 'burnout'. The findings of this study add to this emergent literature in respect of Special Constable wellbeing, by foregrounding the early career elements of potential exposure to trauma.

Although the literature on the experience of being a Special Constable has had some focus on early experience, particularly of initial training, the findings of this study provide fresh insight into how the very early stages of real-life practice as volunteer police officers appear to be a critical moment in their volunteering careers. One Special Constable in this study suggested that 'you never forget your first time', and the challenge signalled by the findings of this study is how police forces can better manage and support those early experiences, and for policing to better understand the downsides and challenges for individual Special Constables of not doing so.

Problems of management, processes and organisation

The Special Constables felt well-managed and supported during initial training, but then in many cases there was a marked contrast, with them viewing the management and

support during the period of transition into early phases of practice as being poor. Many reflected that they experienced a lack of support, supervision and structure in respect of the process for competency development and assessment. The Special Constables in this study experienced systematic problems of process, structure and organisation during the early stages of their volunteering careers.

The early months of building experience and establishing in role seem for most Specials in the study to have been experienced as 'ad hoc' and in some cases as 'disorganised' and 'chaotic', and were viewed as being reliant on 'the goodwill of the Regs' through 'informal' support and coaching. They experienced this early-practice phase as being without 'shape' or 'clarity', that it 'didn't have any support or structure', and of it having 'none of those basics'.

> Then like you're assigned to that station and it just stops… So there is no introduction, there is no, okay well who am I going to go and talk to, where am I, what duties am I doing, it was kind of left up to me.' (B2)

Where early periods of practice are felt to have gone well, the Special Constables often spoke of 'luck', of having been 'fortunate' and of being 'grateful' to particular regular police officers for their personal time and support. Early experiences of practice are characterised by wide variations in engagement, with some new in-service Special Constables lacking any consistency in partnering with regular officers and receiving little support and tutoring, whilst others have a more positive and structured experience.

Across the interviews there was a framing by Special Constables of the importance of their agency in 'owning' their own progression and development; of Specials 'taking responsibility' and being 'pro-active'.

Alongside such arguments about the responsibilities of Specials also sit frustrations that 'too much' is left for Special Constables to achieve 'on their own'.

> 'Some of the onus I know is on me, but it would help if the support was there as well, just to start you off… and then once you've done a few [shifts] then you're on your way then.' (A5)

> 'It might have been useful if I'd got introduced to a few more people rather than having to do it myself. Because I would say the more shy among the Specials may not have done it.' (A18)

Similar challenges in respect of the management and structure of early practice experiences for Special Constables have been identified across several previous studies. Mirrlees-Black and Byron (1994) identified a desire from Specials to have more structured training models with dedicated tutors and mentors akin to regular officer training. Whittle (2014) in a survey of Special Constables identified 46% of Specials did not think the period between training school to being operationally independent was well-handled. Bullock and Leeney (2016) identified a third of Specials in their study did not find the process of induction into role to be well-managed. This study adds to that literature, exploring in greater detail the practical nature of the challenges experienced by

Special Constables in their early phase of practice, and the fundamental gaps in structure, resourcing and pro-active management of this induction and early practice stage.

One consequence of the challenges of effective management of the early practice phase is recognised to be that many Special Constables progress very slowly through it, in terms of building their competency towards reaching independent patrol status, akin to the problems of some Specials occupying a state of 'permanent apprenticeship' identified by Leon (1991: 612). Problems were identified where some Special Constables have stagnated for years in their formal development, attending regularly but not progressing to independent patrol and receiving little supervisory support or attention.

There is also an issue identified, which is not developed in previous studies, but is seemingly rooted in a similar aetiology of poor early supervisory practice, in respect of responses to those Special Constables who do 'fail to thrive' in the early stages of their practice careers being viewed as slow, limited in scope, and skewed towards negative, disengaging approaches. As one Special Constable put it there seemed to be a lack of a 'systematic or managed' approach, leading to 'inconsistent' practice and sometimes to no response and engagement at all. There were also Special Constables in the study who lamented that supervisory interventions when they did occur tended towards 'negativity' and 'exiting' rather than more positive models of re-engagement.

> 'So, if it were me, I'd be asking questions, why aren't you, you know, coming forward and doing more shifts? Soon someone will ask for my uniform, not what can we do to help you out.' (A5)

Another aspect not developed in previous studies is the perspective of many Special Constables in this study that the prevailing narratives of this period of development are of competency 'sign off'; with the emphasis on a process of 'assessment' of competency, rather than upon the managed, supported and structured building of competency. Perceptions are of a 'bureaucratic', 'tick-box culture' towards competency sign-off. Special Constables welcomed experiences they had received of more structured developmental opportunities, such as operations run in order to build experience and to practice skills, and dedicated tutoring resources made available to focus and accelerate learning; but overall, these resources were seen as scarce and as being difficult to access. Their more typical experience was of one-to-one accompaniment with a regular officer, which may be tailored to a greater or lesser extent to their learning needs, and of being left to find their own way through matching the experiences gained against a competency assessment checklist.

Relationships: 'getting in', 'getting on' and 'fitting in'

Special Constables identified the importance for them of forging positive relationships with regular police officer colleagues and teams. For many, initially forming positive relationships was experienced as challenging. The very early stages of becoming a Special Constable 'for real', following on from the completion of initial training, seem to represent the point at which culture and relationships present the greatest challenge. There is

at one level a 'first day at school' metaphor reflected in concerns about 'not knowing where to go', 'not knowing anybody', and not being clear what is expected of them. Particularly in larger police stations, the initial experience of the police station environment and police colleagues was 'intimidating', with the police station environment being unfamiliar and bustling.

For some Special Constables, such experiences were exacerbated by particularly poor experiences in terms of their initial attendance into front-line policing contexts: that they were 'not looked after' or felt of 'zero importance', 'like nobody cares who I am':

> *'And I just felt like, you know, I went and nobody knows who I am, I don't know who anybody is and so I ended up just going home in the end 'cause I wasn't really sure what I was supposed to be doing, and that was the last time I went in.'* (A8)

The Special Constables valued good relationships with regular officer colleagues and 'being part of the team'. However, even for those Special Constables who saw themselves as having achieved positive relationships with regular colleagues, which was a clear majority of those interviewed, this was seen as having been challenging:

> *'They're a tight-knit group. I wouldn't say a matter of years but it certainly took a while to form relationships with regular officers.'* (A21)

The Special Constables often did not feel that their motivations were understood and engaged. They felt at times that the policing organisation is prone to simplifications, at a collective and cultural level; most commonly that all Special Constables just want to join the regulars. Individual Special Constables often have a wide range of motivations, and these are dynamic through time. This sense of complexity about what motivates people to volunteer was felt to not be appreciated by many regular officers. Linked to this point, many of the Specials interviewed did not feel that their force spent enough time getting to know them personally, understanding the skills and experience that they bring, and getting to know why they are volunteering.

The challenges for Specials of establishing relationships with regulars are a long-running theme across the literature (Bullock and Leeney, 2016; Gaston and Alexander, 2001; Leon, 1991; Mirrlees-Black and Byron, 1994; Whittle, 2014). Gill and Mawby (1990) identified that whilst relationships were often positive, they were challenging to develop, and sometimes episodes of 'hostility', albeit not the norm, could have a long-term impact on individuals. Gaston and Alexander (2001: 60) identified that the relationships 'can be problematic'. A survey conducted by the National Police Improvement Agency (NPIA 2010), found that the most common negative experience reported by Specials was poor attitudes from regulars. Whittle (2014) found that 64% of Specials saw a 'divide' or 'partial divide' between Specials and regulars. van Steden and Melhbaum (2019: 424) talk of the challenges when police volunteering 'does not take place in an appreciative environment'.

One dimension very clearly identified by Special Constables in this study is the importance of supervisors, both regular officer supervision and ranked Special

Constables, in 'setting the tone' and 'the right atmosphere' in teams. Examples of contexts were shared in the study both of leaders creating very positive environments for new Specials, and the opposite. Another dimension is the challenge for Specials of 'having to navigate' police 'banter' and 'humour'. This is a topic not particularly engaged with within the literature on Special Constable experience, an exception being Leon (1991) who talked of elements of hostility 'masked' by humour. The Special Constables in this study reflected on experiences they had of Special Constables being referred to as 'seat warmers' and 'ballast'.

The challenges of 'fitting in' and 'getting on' also risk creating a cultural space where, consistent with the findings of previous studies (Gill and Mawby, 1990; Leon, 1991; Millie, 2019), Special Constables respond in ways that can lean towards an over-identification with elements of police officer occupational cultures.

> 'There was a time when I was first in, when I was that someone straight off the cop reality shows. I realise I can be more myself now.' (A13)

Given the potential of Special Constables to bring something fresh and new culturally (Britton and Callender, 2018; Britton and Knight, 2016; Gravelle and Rogers, 2009), in that many Specials bring considerable experience of other organisational cultures in terms of their paid employment outside of policing, and most Specials bring an 'outsider' freshness to the often culturally closed world of policing, this feels to be a missed opportunity. The dominant culture is not disrupted (Loftus, 2008) in ways that it could potentially be.

Discussion

The Special Constabularies across England and Wales are characterised by limited national standardisation and consequently there are some wide variations between different police forces (Britton et al., 2018a). This scale of variability cautions against an excess of generalisation from this small-scale, exploratory, qualitative study. Nevertheless, the research represents the first in-depth study focused on the early career experiences of Special Constables and points towards potentially interesting areas for further research, and also to areas of consideration for policy and practice change.

This study provides new insight into the gaps and challenges of early career support, development and integration for Special Constables. The findings sit consistently with a literature spanning several decades which similarly identifies issues of adequacy of training, challenges in relation to culture, relationships and integration, the desire for more practical training and support, and the 'gap' between academy and practice (Callender et al., 2018a, 2018b; Gaston and Alexander, 2001; Gill and Mawby, 1990; Leon, 1991; Mirrlees-Black and Byron, 1994; Whittle, 2014). The persistence of some of these issues over time suggests that police organisations have not found solutions and achieved changes in policy and practice over a protracted period of time. The findings speak to broader challenges of strategic prioritisation and resourcing (Britton and Callender, 2018). In part, the enduring nature of challenges may also be reflective of a context

of separations, including segregation of Specials and regulars in their early stages of policing career.

The findings suggest that there is a need to substantively recalibrate thinking in police forces away from an over-emphasis on the responsibility of those volunteers to find their own way and make their own progress, and instead towards a recognition of the primacy of the police force's own organisational responsibility and commitment to its volunteers. Across the findings, the early experiences of new Special Constables seem too often to reflect something of a 'trial by ordeal', 'sink or swim' culture rather than to reflect a structured and supportive volunteer induction and integration programme, akin to those found in many other public service volunteering programmes. Cultural norms that police officers need to be 'up to it', 'up for it' and 'one of us' risk providing a canvas of proto-typicality of expectations of what it means to become a police officers (Tyler, 2001; Hogg, 2001). For new volunteer Special Constables, this can in turn manifest into unsympathetic environments for their growth in practice, their cultural integration, and more broadly for their ongoing retention as a volunteer in the service. Alongside these challenges of 'difference' in respect of professional identity, another aspect of the unsympathetic early environment identified in the study relates to the welfare and wellbeing of volunteer officers, particularly those Special Constables who are new-in-service and are being exposed to elements of the realities of policing for the first time (Britton and Knight, 2021).

Previous studies have identified the professional identities of Special Constables as being precarious, challenged and ambiguous (Bullock and Leeney, 2016; Gill and Mawby, 1990; Leon, 1991). The findings of this study help to locate some of the genesis of those professional identities within the challenges of early socialisation of novice Special Constables within their police forces. The study reflects challenges for individual Special Constables of achieving integration, building new relationships, and establishing their professional practice within a police culture that at times is 'othering' of them. Workman-Stark (2017: 40) talks of elements of the 'blue identity' of long hours culture, presenteeism, and solidarity, in terms of constituents of 'what it means to be a "real" police officer' (2017: 41), and as 'points of validation' for the newly evolving identities of new recruits. Part-time, volunteer Special Constables appear to face considerable cultural challenges in developing their own professional identities, finding their own points of validation for their emerging professional identities, given their difference as part-time volunteers within a regular-centric policing culture.

Conclusion

The findings of this study point to the need for a more purposive, integrated and supported model for the early 'beginnings' of Special Constables. Police organisations need to develop more integrated, planned, structured and resourced developmental pathways for new Special Constables from joining up through to attaining competency as an 'independent' Special Constable, and beyond. Such policy and practice developments need to build more practical emphasis across training, and they need to better structure and resource field-training and the building and assessment of practice competency.

Developments in early support for Special Constables also need to engage with the importance of aspects of 'becoming' and 'belonging'. There is a need to improve support and to foreground the wellbeing of new volunteer recruits more clearly, and a need to pro-actively create an environment for new volunteer Special Constables to develop a strong and healthy professional identity as a police officer, to integrate and build relationships, and to become part of a team and foster a sense of being valued.

Declaration of conflicting interests

Funding

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