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Exploring the meanings of 'volunteer' within policing culture and leadership

Presentation to the Voluntary Sector and
Volunteering Research Conference 2016

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The Special Constabulary

- There are approximately 16,000 Special Constables in England and Wales, and a further 7,000 Police Support Volunteers.
- Typically, Special Constables complete between 4 and 16 hours per week (Gaston and Alexander, 2001), with the main activities being community patrol, traffic and policing special events. More recently, some forces have begun to explore specialist Specials, working in cyber crime, safeguarding etc.
- Special Constable role as a ‘training ground’ for becoming a regular full-time officer (Pepper, 2014), having implications for the nature of training programmes, and the necessity of moving beyond the ‘hobby bobby’ stereotype (Bennett, 2010)
- Crucial to note that recruitment, training, operational deployment and management varies geographically, with relatively limited sharing of good practice

Why is our focus on police volunteering?

- Bullock and Leeney (2014) note, the Special Constabulary has been a part of the extended policing family for some time, but more recently has been given new impetus;
- A discourse of expansion in volunteerism is a dominant feature in many police forces across England and Wales, and within national policy.
- In an age of ‘doing more for less’, the meanings of being a volunteer and/or a Special are being reconstituted;
- July 2016: National Strategy for Citizens in Policing.
- BUT:
 - Limited research-base and research activity
 - Limited data, basic gaps in knowledge

Approach

- Completed primary research in two sites and ongoing in another 2 sites
- Interviews with both Police Force staff and Office of the Police and Crime Commissioner staff (completed and analysed 25 interviews)
- Interviews last between 45-60 minutes covering the following topics:
 - Formal strategy and vision;
 - Organisational change;
 - Operational implementation and effectiveness;
 - Meanings associated with volunteers and Specials;
 - Leadership;
 - Future.

Need for a dynamic & individualistic approach

- ‘Singular’ pathway for Specials to enter and progress within the Special Constabulary, based on traditional conceptualisations;
- Police was failing to understand and recognise individual skills;
- Organisational leaders expressed a desire to better define and articulate distinct pathways for people to become a Special Constable, creating in effect different ‘types’ of Special Constable.

...we are not thinking laterally enough as an organisation to say what we want our Specials to be doing and properly tasking them and giving them the skills to do those jobs. We've made a change though, you would never have got a Special Constable working in a specialised crime unit, like here, you know, a couple of years ago.

Tradition in a time of change

- The tradition and history of the Special Constabulary within the force is understood as a recognised barrier as well as the behaviours and attitudes of influential staff working in the police;
- Thinking and practices within the Constabulary are changing, but there remain damaging behaviours, practices and views which need to be addressed and challenged.

...we were always quite shocked when we spoke to [name of senior officer]... who often refers to Special Constables as cannon fodder. And we've said to him actually face-to-face that we think that's a really unhelpful way of characterising Special Constabulary and we sincerely hope that they themselves haven't heard them being referred to as that 'cause I'm sure they probably wouldn't want to volunteer for [name] Constabulary had they know that that's what they're called.

Authenticity

- Tensions associated to the symbols of ‘the uniform’ and ‘warrant card’, which position Specials as lacking authenticity in their position as a holder of The Office of Constable;
- The posting of a small number of Specials into areas traditionally seen as being the domains of Regulars exclusively was symbolic of positive change.

‘You can't rely on them’. And this is the issue, you must never rely on the Special because we don't rely on volunteers. They're a nice to have, you know, that's the language that gets used.

So we've now got Special Constables that are full-time with traffic... they're even wearing white hats... the fact we're allowing them to wear white hats and be given skills that a traffic officer has, that's symbolic around how far we've moved.

Importance of value, recognition and reward

- Importance of recognition, reward, training and development was perceived but relatively small developments had taken place;
- Whilst integration promotes viewing Specials as the same as Regulars, managers must recognise the need for a different approach and style to traditional management;
- Those given responsibility for Specials have a duty of care which cannot wait until ‘the next time I see them’, especially following traumatic events as part of their volunteer role.

...where there's debriefs, [Specials] wouldn't be part of the debrief, as in their perception of what went right, what went wrong, their individual impact, and it's very easy, if you and I were working on the same team, I can see you three days later and I can see if you're still affected by something or otherwise. As a Special Constable, you've gone back to your day job, etc. and it can easily get forgotten about...

Volunteering vs. volunteering in the police

- The importance of the role and identity of the police officer was interpreted as being significantly different to that of a volunteer;
- A key aspect within the analysis was the extent to which the police could exert power and control over volunteers (i.e. volunteers doing what they want, when they want etc.);
- The offer to volunteers to contribute within policing needed to be clearer about what the role actually was and its position within the essence of policing.

They're Office holders, therefore we need to ensure that, as Office holders, and as representatives and as warranted officers, which they are, we're able to deploy them where we most need to at times that most suit us. And I think we're not being clear enough about that at the very start of this. If you want to volunteer, volunteer.

Conclusions

- This is an important moment in time for the agenda of volunteering in policing, especially the case given the upcoming Policing and Crime Bill 2016
- Traditional organisational thinking and structures are limiting the scope of volunteering in policing and indeed restricting the nature of contributions volunteers can make by obfuscating their wider skills and abilities
- Specials may be volunteers but they are not amateurs and they are doing important and challenging things. A culture of expectation goes hand in hand with one of professionalism, and policing should not be scared to set high expectations of volunteers, as it is a sign that the police value them and the work that they are doing (Britton and Callender, 2016)
- Whilst there is much enthusiasm within forces and PCCs, as well as the National Survey for Specials and volunteers showing an appetite for volunteers to be more central to the core business of policing, it is critical to establish mechanisms to capture this value and these activities.

Thank you

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