

ILEC Conference 2006

Discussion Paper (2)

Two Tier Policing

Personnel

Whilst there is nothing particularly new in civilianising back-office functions in the UK police service, recent years has seen the introduction of non-sworn police personnel undertaking front-line operational roles.

In addition to fully-sworn police officers, UK police forces and agencies have a number of other personnel with police powers: those in uniform (most notably Community Support Officers or CSOs, and Special Constables) and non-uniform personnel (such as Serious Organised Crime Agency Agents, investigative assistants, interview assistants, scenes of crime investigators, detention officers and custody assistants etc).

Controversy

The funding, role and efficacy of police personnel with limited police powers, particularly CSOs, continues to make headlines in England and Wales.

The Government is on target to see the introduction of over 24,000 CSOs by 2008 despite the fact that there is little hard evidence of their success beyond their popularity in areas which previously had minimal police presence. Very limited comparison has been made as to their role and performance in different force areas. As a result it is almost impossible to discern what constitutes 'best practice'.

What is clear is that the role of CSOs has gone far beyond that of the 'eyes and ears' for which they were originally introduced. From the very beginning the Police Federation predicted a function and powers creep because we deemed it neither cost-efficient nor effective in policing terms to employ personnel with so many limitations or single functions. Four years on and our concerns have been proven correct. CSOs have accumulated more and more powers, bringing them closer to the role undertaken by police officers and further blurring the lines between what is and what is not a police officer.

This debate is mirrored right across the service when it comes to other police personnel who have been designated police powers. Whilst no one in the service disputes there is a role for specialists, we have serious concerns for the resilience of the police service in responding to the multi-various issues/events.

Powers

CSOs have been conferred a menu of different powers previously restricted solely to police officers and special constables, including the issuing of Fixed Penalty Notices for minor crimes and

disorder. The most contentious is the power to detain a person for a maximum of 30 minutes, whereupon a police constable must either enact an arrest or the individual is allowed to go free.

In contrast to CSOs, special constables share exactly the same powers as fully-sworn police officers – the only difference being that their powers are restricted to the period they are on duty, and to their own force area.

Other police staff have been conferred the specific police powers required in their specialist role, be that investigation or custody work.

Terms and conditions of employment

Police staff terms and conditions of employment are, unlike police officers, negotiated locally. As a result wages vary considerably across the country, with some police staff earning more than probationer constables and others earning less.

Accountability/misconduct provisions vary across the country but invariably mirror police officer conditions.

We believe public service Unions are pushing to civilianise the service not out of a desire to improve police performance and protect the public, but to increase their membership.

How entrenched is this form of policing?

Given the massive increase in their number, CSOs are, for the time being, a new rank in all but name. The Neighbourhood Policing model for which they were originally introduced is, however, predicated on the assumption that this new breed of officer will be a resounding success. If the model fails, the future of CSOs, particularly in terms of recruitment could be put in doubt. A number of chief police officers have sought greater funding flexibility in order to recruit police officers rather than CSOs.

What has worked and what hasn't worked in relation to their operation?

In terms of the Government's much heralded public 'fear of crime' indicators, CSOs have proved a success. In areas previously divest of police presence the visible presence they provide has been very popular.

Their effectiveness, especially in terms of cost-effectiveness, is however, highly debateable. CSOs cost nearly as much as police constables, yet they cannot undertake a wide range of tasks essential to police work. For this reason we suspect the limitations on their powers – guaranteed when the idea of their introduction was first mooted – are likely to change in the future, bringing their role closer and closer to that of a fully-fledged police officer.

As CSO numbers are increasing we are anticipating a reduction in the number of sworn police officers.

What roles are they performing?

The roles undertaken by CSOs vary significantly from force to force. Large numbers work in neighbourhood policing teams (for instance in London, 3 CSOs, 2 Police Constables and 1 Police

Sergeant). Others have been given roles previously undertaken by police officers such as missing person liaison, witness warning and front counter assistants.

See also observations in Personnel above.

Uniform

CSOs wear a uniform very similar to that of the police officers they work alongside. Although the Government and some forces dispute it, our own research shows that this has proved confusing for the public and frustrating for both CSOs and police officers alike.

Use of retired police

Significant potential exists to utilise the skills and experience of retired police officers. This has been reflected in the emergence of recruitment agencies that specialise in providing former officers to police forces.

An example of such work is investigation, where many retired officers have been drafted in to undertake work previously performed by a police officer. While this has proven a success it does raise questions for the medium and long term. If the service relies solely on retired officers to do these tasks where will today's officers gain such experience? Such a policy is intrinsically short-termist and unsustainable.

Use of part time police

Police officers in the UK can work part time, subject to agreement. This may be for one of many reasons: life choice, work/life balance; family commitments; further education.

Such officers are subject to the same terms and conditions as their full-time colleagues. At present initial training is, however, full-time, although this may change in the future.

Use of volunteers

Over forty years ago, at its peak, the Special Constabulary consisted of over 60,000 Special Constables. Today, despite high-profile recruitment campaigns, numbers have dwindled to well under 10,000 – in contrast to the Territorial Army which still numbers above 30,000 personnel.

Special Constables work a minimum of four hours a week and can receive limited expenses but no salary.

Other volunteering of note by members of the general public includes manning front-desk counters in rural forces.