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Police Community Support Officers in Wales: evidence review

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ACPO

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ASB

Anti-social Behaviour

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NP

Neighbourhood Policing

PC

Police Constable

PCSOs

Police Community Support Officers

PEEL

Police effectiveness, efficiency and legitimacy

1. Introduction and background

Following recommendations by the Senedd Equality and Social Justice Committee, the Community Safety Division of the Welsh Government approached the Public Service and Local Government research team within the Welsh Government's Knowledge and Analytical Services division to undertake a light touch review of Police Community Support Officers (PCSOs) in Wales. The review consisted of two stages, a review of available literature relating to PCSOs followed by two small workshops with PCSOs and Neighbourhood Police Officers.

1.1. Aims and Objectives

Although policing is not a devolved power in Wales, since 2011 the Welsh Government has provided funding to support the training and recruitment of 500 additional PCSOs across the four forces and the British Transport Police, with funding allocated in 2021 to support an additional 100 PCSOs. The aim of this review was to consider the contributions of PCSOs in Wales and the extent to which they may be meeting the Welsh Government's commitment to neighbourhood policing and wider aims. In addition to the contributions of PCSOs, the review also sought to consider evidence relating to the actual activities and work of PCSOs and how that may affect what contributions they may have.

Given expected limitations in the literature review in terms of the availability of evidence relating specifically to Wales and the limited number of PCSOs and neighbourhood officers spoken to as part of the workshop, it was not the intention of this review to provide a definitive assessment of the impact of Welsh Government PCSO funding. Furthermore, it was not the intention of this review to evaluate the PCSO role, or judge any individual practices, nor would it be possible at this time to review the impact of changes in the funding provided by the Welsh Government. Instead, the review aims to provide a broader understanding of the types of work PCSOs carry out and their potential contributions for people and communities in Wales and the potential barriers and enablers to contributions.

2. Methodology

As stated above, the review consisted of two stages, first a literature review of available evidence relating to PCSOs in England and Wales, followed by two focus groups with PCSOs and Neighbourhood Police Officers. This approach was adopted in recognition of anticipated paucity of evidence relating to Wales, whereby the focus groups would enable a consideration of the extent to which the findings of the literature review may be relevant to the work and experiences of PCSOs working in Wales.

2.1. Literature review

The literature review was carried out with the assistance of the Welsh Government Library Services who conducted a literature search. The library literature searches were carried out between 1st March to 22nd May 2024.

As part of the search the library considered literature from journal articles, government reports, research reports, books and some theses where relevant. The scope of the search was focussed on the period from 2011-2024 to focus on the period of Welsh Government funding and in recognition of the particular context of policing from 2010 onwards. A broad range of search terms were included to ensure a breadth of literature and to capture evidence elsewhere that might use different terminology. This included:

- ‘Police Community Support Officer(s)’
- ‘PCSOs’
- ‘Community Support Officer(s)’
- ‘community police/ing’
- ‘neighbourhood police/ing’
- ‘police auxiliary/ies’
- ‘community safety officers’
- ‘police liaison officers’
- ‘community service officers’
- ‘community wardens’
- ‘police service aide(s)’

The library search identified 54 pieces of evidence, with 11 identified as having a key focus on PCSOs, 26 having a slightly broader scope with some relevance to PCSOs and 17 items identified of general interest.

The results of the library search were complemented by other searches carried out by the author. Evidence was included in this review if it was deemed sufficient quality for consideration and if it was publicly available. In total 39 pieces of literature were considered as part of this review.

2.2. Focus groups

The Public Services and Local Government team within the Knowledge and Analytical Services division of the Welsh Government carried out two ninety-minute focus groups with PCSOs from each of the four forces, Gwent, South Wales, Dyfed Powys and North Wales police as well as the British Transport Police. Neighbourhood Police Officers were included as part of the groups to provide responses about the role of PCSOs from a wider organisational context, while still working in the same area. With support from the Police Liaison Unit within the Welsh Government, each force was contacted individually and informed about the project and asked to make available one PCSO and one Neighbourhood Police Officer for each session. To minimise disruption to the working day, the sessions were held virtually via Microsoft teams, kept to a maximum of 90 minutes and held on separate days during duty hours to maximise attendance. It is worth noting this length of time for the focus groups did create challenges, and that in order to address all topic areas and keep the sessions running on time some discussions had to be curtailed. In future research it may be worth considering increasing the number and/or length of the sessions to allow for more detailed discussions.

The teams were able to recruit a total of 16 PCSOs and Neighbourhood Police Officers across the two sessions, with at least one PCSO and one Police officer from each force able to attend at least one group. It is important to acknowledge the implications of this sample for the findings from the focus groups, in that the views and experiences discussed cannot be said to representative of PCSOs more broadly. Moreover, it is further accepted that the number of PCSOs spoken to limit the ability to gather insights into the full range of work that PCSOs engage in.

To help participants prepare for the focus groups, the discussion guide used by the research team (please see Annex A) was shared in advance via email, giving the purpose of the research and an opportunity to view the questions that would be asked during the session. The question set was kept broad to garner a wider range of responses, with researchers able to use prompts where required to keep the sessions on track and responses relevant. The discussion guide was designed to gain responses around six key themes identified in the literature review:

- the motivations of becoming a PCSO
- the roles and activities of PCSOs
- the impact of PCSOs within the communities that they serve
- enablers of effective practice for PCSOs
- barriers faced by PCSOs
- implications of reductions in funding for PCSOs in Wales

Each session was led by a member of the research team, with another member of the team acting as a facilitator and taking notes throughout to support the analysis of responses. The focus groups were recorded and transcribed for the purpose of analysis, participants were informed via a shared privacy notice and before recording began that any personal data

such as names and badge numbers would be anonymised during transcription to encourage more open and honest responses. The transcriptions were uploaded to MAXQDA, a qualitative analysis software, for analysis. The responses were reviewed and coded to analyse key themes that emerged and linked back to the overarching themes in the literature review.

3. Literature review findings

3.1. Introduction of PCSOs

PCSOs, sometimes referred to as just Community Support Officers, were first introduced in 2002 as part of the Police Reform Act 2002. The rationale behind their introduction can be seen in the 2001 White Paper 'Policing A New Century: A Blueprint for Reform' which set out the then Labour government's intentions for police reform in the early 2000s and the role it saw in an extended policing family (UK Government, 2001):

> '[beat] officers will routinely and properly be called away from neighbourhood work. Nonetheless, the routine tasks will be important to the local community and a policing presence in some form will play a very big part in reducing anti-social behaviour and disorder and increasing the public's sense of security…the Government therefore intends to enable chief officers to appoint support staff to provide a visible presence in the community, with powers sufficient to deal with minor issues'. (UK Government, 2001: 85)

In particular the white paper envisaged that such officers would offer functions such as anti-social behaviour, environmental matters, public order support, criminal justice support and 'providing additional eyes and ears on the streets at all times' (UK Government, 2001:86). While specifically mentioning the influence of the Metropolitan Police in arguing for this role, the paper argues that such roles would be equally important in rural areas and their local use and powers would be determined by chief officers.

The Association of Chief Police Officers (ACPO), cited in Strickland and Beard (2012), further strengthen this view of the role of PCSOs and their link to neighbourhood policing:

> 'The fundamental role of the PCSO is to contribute to the policing of neighbourhood, primarily through highly visible patrol with the purpose of reassuring the public, increasing orderliness in public places and being accessible to communities and partner agencies working at local level. The emphasis of this role, and the powers required to fulfil it, will vary from neighbourhood to neighbourhood and force to force'. (Strickland and Beard, 2012: 3)

This link between PCSOs and neighbourhood policing is a common theme in the literature with Longstaff et al. (2015) drawing attention to emergence of PCSOs as part of the development of neighbourhood policing and the Neighbourhood Policing Programme in 2005 as a successor to the National Reassurance Policing Programme. Indeed, as noted by O'Neill (2014a), it was argued that PCSOs lacked a formalised 'home' in police force structures in the initial years after their inception. This was seen to be solved with the national roll out of neighbourhood policing, and the development of Neighbourhood Policing Teams across England and Wales, in which PCSOs would provide a core component.

Reflecting this original rationale and purpose PCSOs were granted limited powers as part of the 2002 Police Reform Act, that while short of the powers afforded police officers, was designed to support the functions outlined above. Initially, the affordance of these powers to PCSOs was at the discretion of Chief Officers and was therefore subject to variance,

however following the Police Reform Act 2002 (Standard Powers and Duties of Community Support Officers) Order 2007 (SI 2007/3202), in December 2007, a set of minimum standard powers were introduced for all PCSOs to offer a degree of consistency. As part of this change in 2007 there remained a number of powers available to PCSOs that were still at the discretion of Chief Officers.

3.2. Evolution of Police Community Support Officers and divergence between Wales and England

Since their introduction in the early 2000s the number of PCSOs has varied over time, but the period after the 2010 UK general election presented a particular challenge to PCSO numbers. Longstaff et al. (2015) show that PCSO numbers largely expanded from around 5000 in 2005 to around 16500 in 2010, in line with the broader expansion of the police service and increasing commitment to neighbourhood policing through the then Labour government. However, following the 2010 UK general election and the subsequent period of austerity, there was a notable contraction of both the broader police workforce and the number of PCSOs, as shown in Figure 1.

How these budget challenges have affected police forces and the PCSO workforce has not been uniform. Since 2011, Welsh police forces have received additional funding from the Welsh Government, to employ an additional 500 PCSOs across the four Welsh forces and the British Transport Police in Wales. The purpose of this additional funding was to insulate some of the pressures on PCSO numbers and to reinforce the Welsh Governments commitment to Neighbourhood policing and the ambitions set out above:

> ‘These officers will be highly visible in their communities, engaging with people, providing reassurance and tackling anti-social behaviour. They will play a pivotal role not only in making our communities safer, but in making them feel safer’. (Welsh Government, 2011)

In 2015, the University Police Science Institute (UPSI) at Cardiff University produced a Welsh Government Commissioned evaluation of Welsh Government funded Community Support Officers (Lowe et al. 2015), which concluded that the Welsh Government investment achieved its policy aims in terms of providing additional capacity and mitigating some of the effects of disinvestment. The evaluation included more information on how PCSOs were used, and their impact as will be picked up in later sections of this report. As part of the 2021-2026 Programme for Government, published in June 2021, a further commitment was made to maintain the funding of the 500 PCSOs but also to go further and expand the allocation by 100 additional PCSOs.

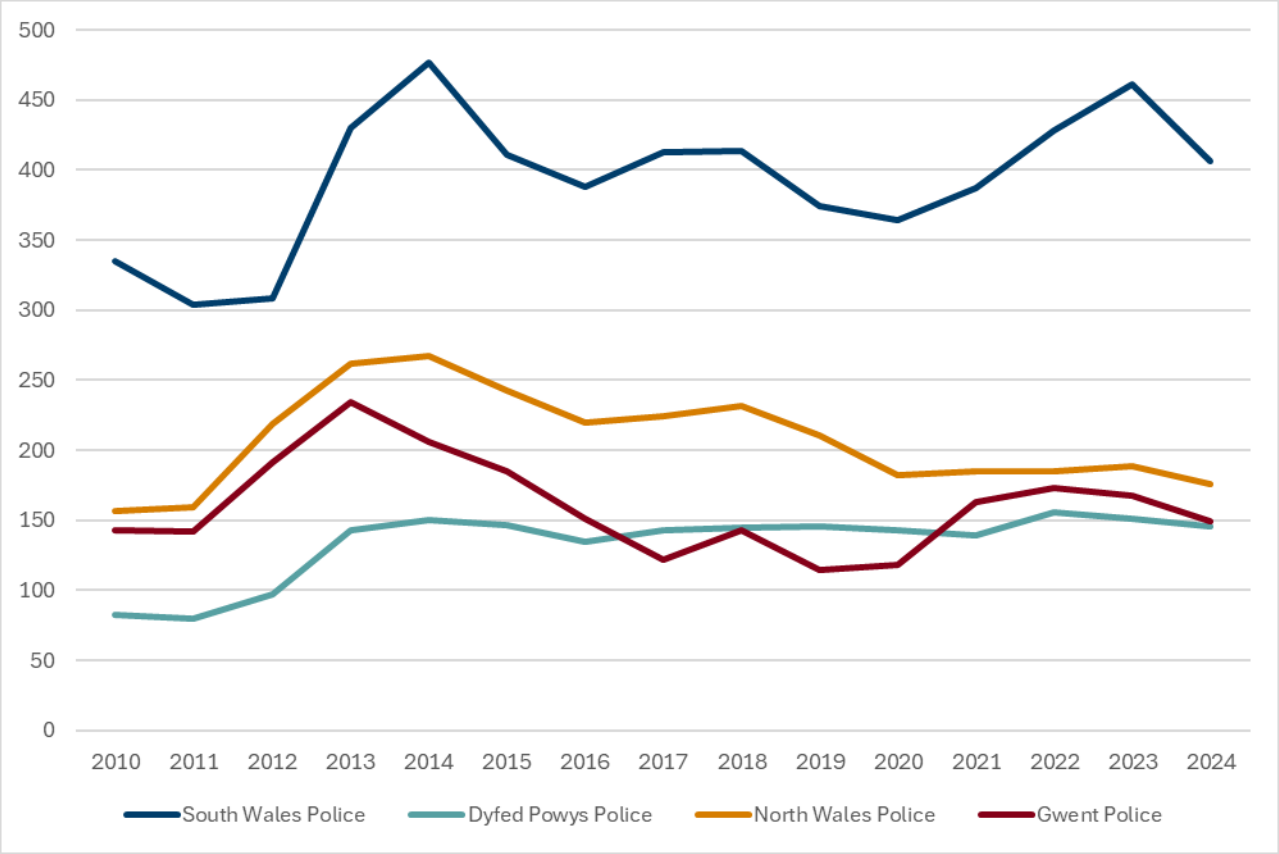
One of the key principles underpinning the PCSO funding in Wales was the operational independence of the police forces in deciding how the PCSOs would be deployed and their day-to-day activities. This meant that their use and deployment could be matched to local needs but also resulted in several ‘downstream consequences’ relating to differing implementation and delivery approaches (Lowe et al. 2015). As will be discussed later, this is important for considerations of how PCSOs operate and how they can contribute to the policy ambitions of the Welsh Government. However, as noted by Lowe et al. (2015), Jones et al (2023) and Grieg-Midlane (2014), the provision of Welsh Government funding for

additional PCSOs for forces in Wales has created a divergence between English and Welsh forces. Given their key role in delivering neighbourhood policing, and providing that community focussed support, Grieg-Midlane (2014) argues that a stronger PCSO workforce indicates a prioritisation of neighbourhood security functions.

How the additional funding has affected PCSO numbers in England and Wales can be seen in Figures 1 using police workforce data provided by the Home Office.

Figure 1 shows PCSO numbers in Wales from 2010 to 2024 and clearly shows PCSO numbers peaking across all four forces in 2014 and followed by fluctuations through 2015-2024 but remaining higher than the position in 2010.

Figure 1: PCSO numbers in Wales by force area 2010-2024



(Home Office, 2025)

Description of Figure 1: line chart showing numbers of PCSOs per year between 2010 to 2024. The line charts show a broad pattern of PCSO numbers peaking in 2013 and 2014, reducing through 2016 to 2020. From 2021 to 2024, there was variation in the different forces, with South Wales Police peaking in 2023, with the other forces remaining stable, but remaining higher than in 2010.

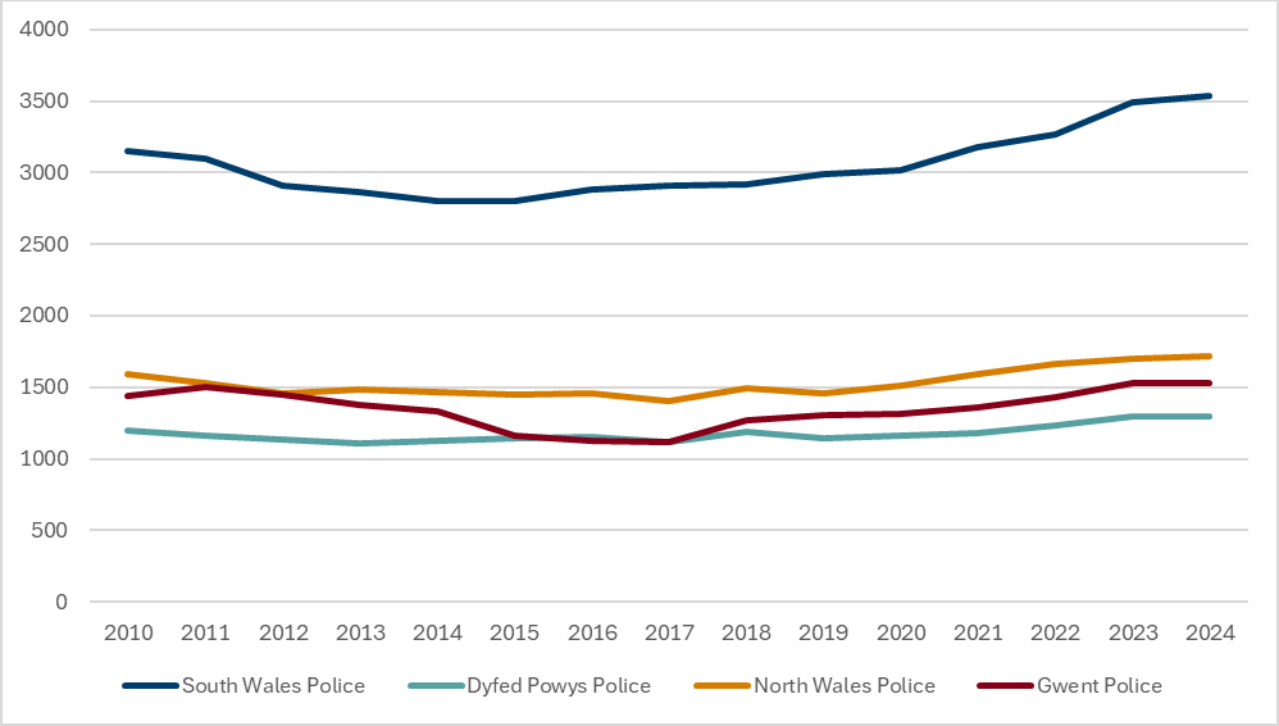
Table 1 compares the total number of PCSOs in Wales to England. It shows that from 2010 to 2024, the number of PCSOs in Wales has increased overtime, compared to England where the number has fallen.

Table 1 - PCSO numbers in England and Wales 2010-2024 (Home Office, 2025)

	2010	2014	2017	2020	2024
Wales Total	718	1100	902	807	878
England Total	16,200	11,966	9311	8373	6661

Figures 2 and Table 2 show Police Officer numbers in England and Wales. Taken together Figure 2 and Table 2 show that the pressures on police officer numbers have been fairly similar across Wales and England between 2010 and 2024, with both regions experiencing staffing pressures around mid-2010s.

Figure 2 - Police Officer Numbers in Wales by force area 2010-2024



(Home Office, 2025)

Description of Figure 2: line chart of police officer numbers decreasing from 2010 to 2017, with South Wales Police Force starting to increase number earliest in 2015 with the other forces gradually increasing from 2017, returning to 2010 levels or higher across all police forces by 2024.

Table 2 - Police Officer numbers in England and Wales 2010-2024 (Home Office, 2025)

	2010	2014	2017	2020	2024
Wales Total	7370	6717	6543	6998	8076
England Total	136,364	121,192	111,536	122,112	139670

From this data, it is evident that both England and Wales have seen substantial pressures on police officer numbers through the 2010s, however the maintenance of PCSO numbers in Wales has somewhat protected against the broader pressures on police numbers in Wales.

3.3. The activities and role of PCSOs

In addition to changes in PCSO numbers over time, it is important to consider the role of PCSOs, how they are used and their associated powers. From the literature there are common and recurrent themes around local variation, the balance of community support functions and police support and evolution of their powers over time.

When considering the role of PCSOs, the College of Policing frames the role and purpose of PCSOs in the 2022 PCSO handbook as follows:

> 'the fundamental role of a PCSO is to contribute to the policing of neighbourhoods through targeted visible patrols, with the purpose of engaging with and reassuring the public; increase orderliness in public places; being accessible to communities; and working at a local level with stakeholders to solve or mitigate issues, problems or safety concerns faced by the community' (College of Policing, 2022:13)

It is worth noting that this definition is entirely consistent with the ACPO position on the role of PCSOs cited in Strickland and Beard (2012). In the pursuit of this role the 2022 handbook states that a key part of PCSO work involves spending extended periods of time embedded in communities rather than being occupied by other administrative functions or spending too much of their time in local police stations. As noted by Longstaff et al. (2015), the focus on foot patrols and community immersion, rather than paperwork and desk work, is viewed as an important component in enabling community engagement and the development of social capital. Furthermore, community engagement and developing social capital in a local area was seen to be key part of the PCSO approach:

> 'social capital is crucial to the work of PCSOs…PCSOs are meant to get to know their beat and the people within it well. Building up contacts in the community is vital for this, not only to help solve problems for individuals, but also to find solutions to community issues' (O'Neill, 2014: 6).

As noted by Weston as part of a PhD study the ability to promote community engagement was often linked to visible foot patrols as it promoted greater opportunities for interpersonal contact between PCSOs and members of the community. Moreover, frequency and regularity of foot patrol in localities were seen to help 'develop the acquaintanceships they share with members of the public both informally and formally. Attending the same places and coming across the same people allows the PCSOs to informally build on their previous 'seeings' of said persons to learn more about them and their locality' (2020: 205). They then go on to say how the communicative ability of PCSOs can be constrained for a number of reasons, such as the use of vehicles for patrol purposes, particular decisions about the location and routes for foot patrols. This will be discussed in greater detail later in the report when considering barriers to PCSO contributions and community engagement.

These are consistent with the approach set out in the 2022 PCSO handbook, which suggest PCSO should:

- Develop comprehensive knowledge and understanding of the local community in which they operate to identify and effectively support those in their community affected by offending and those who are vulnerable or at risk
- Proactively engage develop close working ties with the community
- Build rapport, trust and confidence with individuals across the community, providing advice and guidance in support of their needs

When describing the role of the PCSO the Association of Chief Police Officers (ACPO) specifically argued that the role of PCSOs 'should always remain within the framework of neighbourhood policing with an emphasis on engagement as opposed to the enforcement, and for the sake of clarity, distinction should be made between the role of a PCSO and that of a sworn officer'.

3.4. PCSO Powers

Reflecting this more specific focus on community support and engagement, PCSOs are granted a more limited set of powers compared to Police Officers. As described by Strickland and Beard (2012), upon their initial introduction, the powers available to PCSOs were fully within Chief Constable's discretion, and they could draw upon a range of powers contained in part 1 of the Police Reform Act 2002. In 2007. As part of the Police Reform Act 2002 (Standard Powers and Duties of Community Support Officers) Order 2007 PCSOs were granted a number of standard powers, with some powers remaining at the discretion of chief officers.

In 2017 the way in which powers are designated to PCSOs was amended with the previous list of standard and discretionary powers removed. In their stead the Policing and Crime Act 2017 made it so that chief officers must decide which powers they wished to designate to their PCSOs. In selecting powers, all powers available to Police Constables could be made available to PCSOs with the exception of those outlined in schedule 10 of the Police and Crime Act 2017, which included powers of arrest, stop and search, those which require police officer rank (College of Policing, 2022).

For O'Neil, Maillard and van Stedan, this change represented an expansion of PCSO powers which they discussed as part of a 'shift towards an orientation which highlights the enforcement elements of the role' (2022: 10). Indeed, noting these changes around PCSO powers (at the discretion of Chief Officers), the College of Policing note that 'consideration should be made as to whether any power bestowed on a PCSO may cause an increase in enforcement rather than a community-focussed non-punitive outcome' (2022: 7).

3.5. Variation

In considering the work of PCSOs in practice the literature broadly focussed on the role of PCSOs in supporting neighbourhood policing functions (College of Policing, 2022). In the literature it was apparent the individual activities that a PCSO could be engaged in in pursuit of this neighbourhood function was numerous (O'Neill, 2014b; College of Policing, 2022). There were however some common fundamental principles centred on the idea of

increasing visibility, accessibility and providing assurances, with the main vehicle of this being accessible patrols within local communities.

While there was a consistent framing around the guiding principles of PCSO activity in the literature the issue of variation in PCSO activities was frequently identified. This variation has been a persistent characteristic of PCSO delivery (Longstaff et al., 2015) and was noted in the evaluation of the National Reassurance Policing Programme (Tuffin, Morris, and Poole, 2006). This variation has been noted in regard to the powers available to PCSOs (discussed in section 3.4.), the uniform of PCSOs (Casey, 2008) and with regards to the specific activities they perform (O'Neill, 2014b; Higgins, 2018).

The 2015 evaluation of Welsh Government funded community support officers which found substantial variation in PCSO activity in case study sites across Wales. As noted in the evaluation, this variation was largely a response to specific context, needs and requirements of local policing and 'the situated problem they [PCSOs] deal with mean the reality of their day-to-day activities can be very different' (Lowes et al, 2015: 64).

There was also a noted consideration of how different geographical contexts can also affect the balance of PCSO work with the type of community engagement required varying across urban and rural contexts, and upon different community types. Such a need to reflect local contexts and policing needs is also noted in the PCSO handbook with regards to selection of powers: 'the use of discretionary powers by PCSOs, however, should remain a decision for chief officers based on their own policing needs' (College of Policing, 2022). The issue of rurality was also noted in some cases where PCSOs were required to cover larger areas which required the use of vehicles and reduced time spent on foot patrols (Oldfield, 2021). There was some very limited evidence that there was a 'marginal propensity towards greater levels of public feelings of safety when PCSOs are on visible foot patrol' when compared to use of a vehicle (Oldfield, 2021: 28). Other research, undertaken as part of a PhD, found that PCSOs were increasingly using vehicles to navigate larger neighbourhood policing areas 'despite some recognition of the communicative obstacles it could create' (Weston, 2020: 206)

3.6. Community support vs police support

In considering variations in PCSO work, a helpful and common distinction in the literature was the extent to which PCSOs were involved in 'community support' functions or 'police Support' functions. Such a distinction was made in the 2015 evaluation of Welsh Government Community Support Officers. 'Community support' was described as focusing 'upon engagement activities and performing the kinds of tasks that help to nurture and support community cohesion' while 'police support' was described as PCSOs undertaking tasks that were previously performed by Police Constables (2015: 65). The evaluation was clear that these represented ideal types, and in practice PCSO activity includes elements of both, and nor did the evaluation place a value judgement on what was seen to be 'more valid'. The report recognised that there 'was an understanding that it is where key elements of the 'police support' and 'community support' functions are blended that the better outcomes for communities arise' (Innes et al, 2015: 71). However, it did suggest that periods of austerity have weighted the balance of PCSO activities towards more police support tasks.

This is consistent with other literature. A report by the Police Foundation noted that while PCSOs have been 'seen as the last bastion of community engagement and local proactivity, PCSOs are also performing a broader role than initially conceived, including elements of incident response, police support work, and safeguarding/risk assessment work' (Higgins, 2015: 65). As with the 2015 evaluation by Innes et al, the Police Foundation highlight pressures on workforce capacity and austerity as presenting a challenge for neighbourhood policing more broadly.

There was some evidence that this balance between 'community support' and 'police support' was a source of tension. For O'Neill (2014b) while PCSOs are seen to serve the interests and needs of the local community, at the same time they serve a dual role as 'intelligence gatherer' for the police which may at times conflict. O'Neill argued that local police structures placed greater importance and significance on PCSOs who provided intelligence, or who supported traditional police functions around arrests rather than those who most effectively engaged with communities.

Similarly, evidence collected as part of a PhD looking at the discourses used by PCSOs in the pursuit of their duty further evidenced this need to balance the competing requirements of community policing. Various examples are provided of how even within the same interactions PCSOs are expected to balance the requirements of supporting the community and offering reassurance while also representing the interests of the police, enforcing rules and gathering evidence (Wegorowski, 2018).

Given the diverse nature of the PCSOs role, particularly in the context of different forces with vastly different geography and demographics, Sutherland (2014) identified five PCSO 'types' through workshops and interviews with supervisors.

The 'Traditionalist' type follows the original intention of the PCSO role when it was first created, with an emphasis on providing police visibility and reassurance via foot patrols in local areas. In order to do this, the traditionalist attempts to minimise duties that take them away from visible patrols and as a result are more likely to be well known within the community. Sutherland notes that these types tended to stay in role longer than others.

The 'Auxiliary Police Officer' type is more likely than others to respond to incidents even if they are outside of their usual area of work, particularly if the work is more similar to the work carried out by Police Officers. These PCSOs tended to be younger or newer to the service and likely to have intentions to apply to be a police officer and were valued in forces due for their contribution to defined, measurable targets.

The 'Specialist' is a PCSO given specific thematic duties such as community safety initiatives due to developed expertise and skill or being allocated to a particular geographical area due to a pre-existing skillset, such as speaking multiple languages.

The 'Community Organiser' takes an active role in establishing local partnerships and identifying and liaising with stakeholders to develop community action plans. The community organiser is capable of working independently and taking a leading role in community engagement events.

The ‘Empty suit’ performs none of the above expected roles of PCSOs and consistently fails to engage with the public or provide a visible presence in the communities that they serve, instead spending more time in their station that on foot patrols.

It is important to note that Sutherland clarifies that most PCSOs will embody several or all of these types, with only a small minority falling under the fifth type. It is also not possible if the nature of these types is down to the individual differences of PCSOs or their allocation of duties within the needs of the force area they work within.

3.7. Abstraction

In addition to the identified tensions between functions of ‘community support’ and ‘police support’, there was a recurrent theme in the literature relating to the issue of ‘abstraction’, and the idea that PCSOs should not be tasked with duties and functions ‘that do not form part of their core role or for which they are not trained’ (ACPO, 2007: 12). O’Neill (2014b) argues that the core functions of PCSOs were to engage with communities and that in doing so ‘knowing their beats and the people in them is what makes PCSOs most effective’ (2014b: 5). However, O’Neill highlights that PCSOs were ‘easy targets for abstraction to other beat areas’ and that while this helped alleviate short term pressures, if persistent, such events would compromise the ability of PCSOs to develop that long term social capital. Examples identified by O’Neill included PCSOs being used to plug gaps in other neighbourhood areas, being redeployed to other beat areas to support targeted operations or being used to patrol ‘hot spot’ areas, typically very small areas, away from their own neighbourhood areas.

Other examples of abstraction identified in the literature included PCSOs being deployed inside police stations ‘to cover bureaucracy’ (House of Commons, 2008: 335), or a more common issue noted in the literature, having their workload affected by reactive tasking (Higgins and Hales, 2017). The engagement of PCSOs in activities formerly undertaken by police officers, or to support police staff in particular situations where there is a high likelihood of conflict situations, such as the nighttime economy, raises questions about the suitability of their training, powers and protection for those situations.

> ‘PCSO numbers are being cut and, in some places, their roles redesigned. In general, they are performing a broadened role, including elements of response, police support work and safeguarding in addition to their community focused role. Some PCSOs expressed discomfort at the risks and responsibilities they were being asked to carry and concerns that this is pushing them to the limits of their training and powers’. (Higgins, 2018: 48)

> ‘The feelings of having inadequate powers are due to PCSOs being directed to deal with incidents not appropriate for the role and used as a substitute for police officers’. (Oldfield: 2021:48)

3.8. Austerity and pressures on PCSO roles

The issue of abstraction and diversion of PCSO resources and time away from community engagement is not necessarily a new phenomenon. In the 2008 Casey review, it was noted that there were concerns from some PCSOs about the rates of abstraction with regards to

PCSOs being taken off ‘foot patrols and diverting them to other tasks such as manning police station reception desks’ (2008: 31). However, there is some evidence to suggest that periods of austerity and constraints on capacity have encouraged the use of PCSOs to shore up policing capacity as noted in the 2015 evaluation of PCSOs in Wales. There is also a drift towards the delegation of tasks traditionally carried out by police officers to the increased pool of CSOs, suggesting some compensation for a declining workforce and organisational change by way of substitution of responsibilities (2015: 69).

In 2016 Unison conducted a survey of PCSOs which centred on the impact of funding cuts to police forces and PCSO numbers in England (with PCSO numbers being protected in Wales due to Welsh Government funding). In the survey, that was sent out to PCSOs who were a member of UNISON, 57% of those who responded reported having stopped performing some core neighbourhood policing duties in favour of redeployment to work which keeps them off the beat. In the open text responses, many of the responses refer to meeting needs of crime response. (UNISON, 2016).

Similarly, O’Neill et al argue that there has been evidence of mission creep and shift towards an orientation which ‘highlights the enforcement elements of the [PCSO] role’ (2022: 10). They argue that this shift is driven in part by internal pressures towards ‘real policing’, which have been heightened by external pressures of austerity and pressures on both PCSO and wider police capacity. Such pressures are argued to have tightened recruitment channels and helped reinforce the idea that PCSOs are a route to gain experience for applications to become a constable, and that the role is ‘becoming a training ground for future police officers’ (O’Neill et al., 2022:11). Such a point was also evident in the 2015 Welsh Government evaluation in which it was claimed that the PCSO role ‘has increasingly been cast by forces as a ‘stepping stone’ into joining the police service, rather than a distinctive role in its own right’ (Innes et al., 2015: 72)

In addition to concerns around how pressures in the broader police service may be affecting the type of work PCSOs are asked to do, there is some evidence around how broader cutbacks in other settings are affecting PCSO work. The UNISON survey of PCSOs found that 16% of respondents undertake work which they believe should be the responsibility of another agency all the time, with a further 53% reporting undertaking this work ‘regularly’ (Unison 2016: 9). Similarly, Higgins reported how in one police force PCSOs had been ‘given responsibility for liaising with local care homes and putting in place individual plans for children considered to be a risk…these PCSOs felt undertrained for the task and carried the additional responsibility uneasily’ (2018: 48). An example of this can be seen in the evaluation of the Think Family Early Intervention Programme, which while positive about the merits of the program’s success did include some findings relating to perceptions of whether the police, and in particular PCSOs, should be taking the lead in early intervention and that in some cases officers weren’t equipped to deal with particularly complex cases (Bradbury Jones et al., 2021)

3.9. Evidence of abstraction in Wales

It is important to note that much of the literature above refers to England and Wales and given the additional funding in Wales for PCSOs it cannot be assumed that the issues of abstraction mentioned above are applicable to the Welsh context. While the evidence base

in Wales is limited, the 2015 evaluation of Community Support Officers in Wales did include some information relating to the work of PCSOs and the risks of abstraction. For example, it was argued that Community Support Officers were 'increasingly taking responsibility for the responding to disorder, ASB and non-crime calls for service from the public', which was acknowledged did free up police officers time, but did simultaneously constrain 'the ability of CSOs to conduct engagement work to some degree' (2015: 71). In addition while PCSO numbers were maintained in Wales due to the additional Welsh Government funding, there was evidence that PCSO roles were somewhat affected by the broader funding context of policing and police officer numbers: 'there is also a drift towards the delegation of tasks traditionally carried out by police officers to the increased pool of CSOs, suggesting some compensation for a declining workforce and organisational change by way of substitution of responsibilities (2015: 69).

In addition to the 2015 evaluation, another source of information that provides some, albeit limited, insights into the issues of PCSO abstraction are various HMIC reports published in 2016. The issue of PCSOs being asked to respond to reactive demands, and to pick up tasks typically associated with police officers was picked up in a 2016 HMIC PEEL: Police effectiveness report (HMIC, 2016a). As part of the 2016 PEEL review, HMIC reviewed police forces in England and Wales, including the four forces in Wales. These reports offer an insight into the extent to which abstraction was an issue in Wales. Generally, the HMIC found that all forces in Wales were deploying PCSOs in accordance with College of Police guidance and largely had processes to ensure that PCSO were able to maintain adequate levels of community engagement. While there was evidence of abstraction in Welsh police forces, the HMIC reports for each force largely suggest that the diversion of PCSOs away from neighbourhood functions in Wales was minimal.

In Dyfed Powys (HMIC 2017), the HMIC found that while PCSOs are 'sometimes redeployed to cover response duties such as crime scene preservation', they 'spend most of their time in their communities, working with members of the public in order to prevent crime and reduce anti-social behaviour'.

In Gwent, HMIC stated that 'PCSOs engage with local communities and identify and solves local problems in accordance with national guidance' (HMICb, 2017: 12). It also found that Gwent Police had a strict policy to ensure that PCSO time is focussed on their neighbourhood role.

In North Wales, HMIC concludes that the 'force employs PCSOs in line with College of Policing guidance. They are occasionally abstracted to cover response duties such as scene preservation, or in support of major operations, but spend the majority of their time in the community' (HMIC, 2017c: 17)

In South Wales, HMIC stated that 'the level of abstraction for PCSOs is moderate and does not prevent them from being effective in their role. PCSOs are not used to cover response duties and are only occasionally used to obtain statements or undertake tasks such as house to house enquiries' (HMIC, 2017d:13). The HMIC report refers to data from South Wales police that show that PCSOs spend between 70 and 80 percent of their time working in their communities.

It is worth noting that these reports date back to 2017 and as such do not provide an up-to-date picture of how PCSO roles have reacted to ongoing pressures in recent years. More recent PEEL reports undertaken as part of HMIC inspections do not include details on PCSO deployment and the issues of abstraction.

3.10. Contributions of PCSOs

Before delving into the contributions of PCSOs it is important to note that there is a consistent refrain in the literature, that it is difficult to assess and identify the 'impact' of PCSOs due to the complex landscape in which they operate and the nature of the benefits that they provide. Things like community engagement, trust and legitimacy, and confidence in policing are difficult to measure and are affected by multiple factors beyond PCSOs. This is also the case with perceptions of safety, and the incidence of crime and disorder in which the impact of PCSOs are likely to be limited when compared to other broader factors and drivers.

As such this section does not assess the impact of PCSOs as there is insufficient evidence available to do so. Instead, this section reports on findings from the literature that provide an insight into the type of contributions PCSOs can make to policing and communities.

When considering the contributions of PCSOs the findings from the literature will be separated into four broad areas: Community engagement and perceptions of police, visibility and perceptions of safety, crime and disorder reduction and prevention and recruitment and diversity of the police.

3.11. Community engagement, public trust and legitimacy

As explored in earlier sections, a key rationale in introducing PCSOs into the local policing landscape was that it would assist in enhancing community engagement and help to improve and maintain relationships between communities and the police, thereby improving local confidence and perceptions of trust and legitimacy. The 2015 review of PCSOs in Wales found multiple cases whereby police forces were using PCSOs to engage in community work and community cohesion activity aimed at building relationships with communities. However, the review found mixed evidence as to the extent to which these activities were translating into positive community perceptions of the police, and increased trust and confidence. Drawing upon evidence from public perception surveys carried out by police forces in Wales, and evidence from case studies of PCSO deployment the research found limited evidence to suggest that community perceptions of the police had been improved through the additional PCSO resource in Wales:

> "Only in North Wales has there been positive impact over the implementation period, with negative changes across the rest of the country. Whether these changes can be attributed to extra CSOs is difficult to grasp. In some instances, the data suggest that the public differentiate between visibility of CSOs and warranted police officers, preferring the latter, and that there is some doubt about CSOs' ability to perform 'policing' functions. Indeed, the CSOs themselves report some confusion amongst the public as to the purpose of their role and available powers, which may impact upon confidence. The negative trajectory in aggregate trust and confidence trends is likely associated with similar, broader trends

> across England and Wales that, by implication, the additional CSOs have not been sufficient to reverse." (Lowes et al, 2015: 68)

As Lowes et al note, this finding does not suggest that PCSO funding has had no effect, or a negative effect, on public perceptions but rather broader changes in the context of policing and more broadly may be having a larger effect that may be obscuring PCSO contributions in this area.

More broadly the evidence based on the contribution of PCSOs to community engagement is patchy with limited academic and policy research as noted by Sutherland (2014). In Sutherland's review of PCSOs in Cambridgeshire, public responses to a survey suggested there was support and satisfaction with PCSOs and they valued their perceived approachability and friendliness. Moreover, the review found that partners considered PCSOs to provide a consistent visible presence in communities and were able to build rapport with local residents which could assist in local intelligence gathering. The review found that senior police officials 'put a high value on the traditional aspects of the PCSO role particularly "community engagement" which was seen as having a strong bearing on public satisfaction. There was a concern raised in some quarters of "mission-creep" and the move towards PCSOs as auxiliary police officers. The value of PCSOs in promoting community cohesion through their work was also highlighted' (Sutherland, 2014: 37)

In 2006, a Home Office evaluation of PCSOs was undertaken that concluded that PCSOs had a number of benefits in terms of their increased visibility within local communities, perceptions that they were more approachable and accessible than police officers, positive approaches to engaging with young people, and more engaged in local communities. However, the evaluation also found evidence of confusion from members of the public about the role of PCSOs and 'whilst appreciating the role of the CSOs, saw them as less valuable than fully sworn police officers' (Cooper et al, 2006: 40).

The 2008 Casey review (Casey, 2008) found that members of the public who had engaged with a PCSOs tended to be positive about the role they play, and key factors things that people identified included visibility in the community, reassurance, approachability, problem solving and talking to young people, as well as acting as a deterrent and reducing crime and anti-social behaviour (which is discussed later).

Within the literature there is a recurrent tension around public perceptions of PCSOs and the powers available to them. The 2008 Casey report found that those who had concerns about PCSOs often referred to their lack of powers and argued that there was support for PCSOs having stronger powers. Similarly, Oldfield found that while there were perceptions that PCSOs do provide a sense of reassurance 'the majority of the public maintain that the police officers provide higher levels of reassurance and therefore would rather see police officers on patrol than PCSOs (2021: 29). This is also referenced in the 2015 Welsh Government review which states that 'in towns there is an increased presence on the street which is valued by the public although there is evidence to suggest many do not feel completely confident in the ability and powers of CSOs to deal with many of the issues they are likely to face' (2015: 69).

Conversely Grieg-Midlane argued that 'PCSOs limited powers may be seen as strengths, if being viewed as less authoritative or threatening by certain sections of the public gives them

better access to community information' (2014: 11). Similarly, O'Neil (2014a) argues that a significant benefit of PCSOs is their ability to build trust with communities through extended engagement and social capital building, and that 'their inability to use significant force or the power of arrest is a strength in this regard as it requires them to act as negotiators and reduces the threat they pose, thus building that need trust' (2014a: 12)

O'Neill (2014d) carried out observations and interviews with PCSOs and police officers across two forces in the north of England and found that PCSOs who had worked in their community for an extended period of time will have "a well-rounded view of the current problems and will be trusted" to carry out interventions in local communities and may have higher levels of engagement with local people when carrying out community projects. However, O'Neill makes it clear that in order to gain this experience and build trust, it is vitally important that PCSOs are given sufficient and ongoing training in order to understand what good engagement work looks like. Achieving this would necessitate the prioritisation of community-focused functions in PCSO work such as foot patrols, problem-solving, and working with young people and schools, particularly in urban and working-class areas, and avoiding abstraction where possible as this can damage PCSOs social capital-building efforts.

Longstaff et. al. (2015) write that community-facing staff were key to effective engagement with communities and in encouraging people to come forward with information to help keep their own neighbourhoods safe, through face-to-face contact with officers and PCSOs on patrol that they know and can trust. The report recognises PCSOs with a depth of local knowledge of their beat as being instrumental in increasing engagement and improving police legitimacy with the public, particularly in areas with diverse communities where they can establish trust and help solve problems within neighbourhoods.

This focus on community engagement and visibility as an enabler of effective practice is echoed by the college of policing (College of Policing, 2018) who produced a report following a rapid evidence assessment exploring effective neighbourhood policing. The findings of the report showed evidence that targeted foot patrols and community engagement, when implemented with problem solving, improved feelings of safety, increased trust and improved public perceptions of policing within communities, as well as reducing criminal victimisation and disorder. However, the report found that simply carrying out foot patrols without a community engagement or problem-solving aspect would be unlikely to improve public trust in the police.

Barriers to effective community engagement for PCSOs can be organisational or environmental. Lister, Adams and Phillips (2015) identified five barriers to community engagement faced by PCSOs, the largest issue they identified was issues around abstraction, which reduced the amount of time neighbourhood policing staff were able to spend engaging and building local relationships due to prioritising demand but also mean that pre-planned community activities were disrupted. The authors noted that staff felt a significant increase in duties following recent budget cuts, which had affected resources. Short notice changes to deployment and shift patterns due to sudden spikes in demand in other areas was responsible for abstraction of staff from their usual working areas, meaning a reduction in opportunities to engage meaningfully with those communities and had a visible presence, or being off duty during times of community need. A lack of suitable

performance system was also noted, one which was capable of effectively acknowledging and measuring the effectiveness of community engagement on wider policing. The authors also noted the difficulty faced by both PCSOs and police staff in reconciling the benefits of engagement with the public (such as intelligence gathering) in dealing with crime, with the priorities of law enforcement. Though community engagement was helpful in activities such as intelligence gathering, the use of that intelligence in dealing with crime could undermine public trust in PCSOs.

While broader than PCSOs, it is worth briefly noting, as above, the important role PCSOs have for neighbourhood policing, and as a signifier of continued support for neighbourhood policing. As such it should be borne in mind that there is a wider evidence base regarding the contributions of neighbourhood policing as an approach for community engagement, trust, confidence and perceptions of police legitimacy. For example, the review of evidence relating to community policing by Henry and Mackenzie (2009) and a college of policing review of neighbourhood policing (Colover and Quinton, 2018). While such findings, may be pertinent to the role of PCSOs in supporting neighbourhood policing, it was not within scope for this work to review the evidence relating to neighbourhood policing.

3.12. Visibility, perceptions of safety and reassurance

As noted earlier, a key driver of the introduction of PCSOs and their role in supporting the delivery of neighbourhood policing was the benefits they would bring around visibility, reassurance and perceptions of safety in local communities. As with other areas of contribution, the evidence in published literature on PCSO contributions to reassurance and safety is limited.

In a review of PCSOs in Cambridgeshire, a survey of residents found that the most frequently mentioned positive comment about PCSOs related to their visibility and that a majority of respondents gave this as a reason for supporting the use of PCSOs. The review also found that stakeholder partners were supportive of the PCSO role reporting that ‘partner agent’s interviews all confirmed that PCSOs continue to provide a reassuring presence for the community’ (Sutherland, 2014: 35).

The 2006 evaluation of PCSOs found that a large majority of PCSOs reported that they had made a positive impact on public reassurance, and that qualitative insights with residents and businesses suggested that there were some improved feelings of safety where the presence of PCSOs was apparent. However, the evaluation reported that ‘evidence from the evaluation is limited, however, because of the comparatively recent introduction of CSOs in some of the areas’ (Cooper et al., 2006: 39).

Similarly, the 2015 review of Welsh Government commissioned review of community support officers in Wales found that the relationship between PCSOs, visibility and perceptions of safety were difficult to interpret:

> ‘Whilst the Beaufort Omnibus survey does provide limited evidence that people feel safer as a result of regularly seeing CSOs on foot patrol, this one measure alone cannot capture the complexities of how communities construct their sense of security. For example, whilst the evidence from combined data sources shows regular CSO visibility has generally increased over the implementation period

(except in DPP), for a significant proportion of the public, high visibility alone makes no difference to perceptions of safety. The implication is that other aspects of community engagement and problem solving are also important' (Innes et al, 2015: 68)

The evaluation goes on to conclude that while there is evidence to suggest that there had been a perception of an increased police presence during the time in which additional PCSOs were funded in Wales, there was evidence of a dosage effect in which overly high levels of police visibility can be just as harmful as too little visibility and may be counterproductive to reassurance. Such findings are consistent with broader concerns around community policing highlighted by Henry and Mackenzie in which when discussing requests for more visible policing highlight that 'some commentators have suggested that acceding to these requests may not in fact reassure people in practice but might intensify feelings of being unsafe by drawing attention to the apparently problematic character of the neighbourhood in question' (2009: 39). The authors point out that it is not just the presence of high visibility policing alone that promotes reassurance and perceptions of safety, but it is the application of high visibility policing to neighbourhoods and places in a way that engage 'with the social-structural issues which are the drivers of local crime and disorder problems' (2009: 39-40).

Such findings are consistent with more recent work by Oldfield (2021) in relation to PCSOs in Staffordshire. As part of this work, it was found that PCSOs did have a marginal positive effect on residents' perceptions of safety and in providing reassurance. Consistent with the above, the research also found that such positive effects were contingent upon deployment decisions: 'the data emphasises that PCSOs can only provide these positive contributions if deployed appropriately to their core role and powers. Responses from across all participant groups highlight that this is not always the case in Staffordshire, which in turn decreases the sense of safety and reassurance felt by the public' (Oldfield, 2021: 57).

Further to these considerations around the relationship between PCSO visibility and contributions to perceptions of safety and reassurance, there is evidence within the literature to suggest the PCSOs visibility can be constrained in a number of ways. Most notably, there are the arguments noted earlier relating to abstraction and the way in which decisions to deploy PCSOs in roles other than their neighbourhood function may hamper their ability to provide a visible policing presence. This is evident across a number of sources. Casey (2008) highlighted examples of PCSOs being taken off foot patrols in favour of other tasks such as manning reception desks. The UNISON survey (2016) of PCSOs included various responses about the changing nature of PCSO work with some claims of less time being spent on high visibility patrols.

In addition, there is some limited evidence that suggest there are other more pragmatic decisions that may have an effect on PCSO visibility. As Weston (2021) shows, PCSOs have traditionally been more likely to rely on foot patrols in the exercise of their functions, but highlighted evidence of increasing PCSO use of vehicles for patrol which hinder approachability and visibility. In addition, Weston draws attention to how changes to walking routes, or expansions of patrol areas can also affect police visibility. Similar evidence is also evident in Oldfield's (2021) work which indicate that PCSOs, particularly in rural areas, are being asked to cover large areas, requiring the use of vehicles and hindering public visibility.

Similar issues relating to rurality are also raised by Higgins (2018) in which PCSOs were covering upwards of 50 villages which presented issues for promoting familiarity.

3.13. Crime and disorder reduction

As with previous areas, robust evidence relating to the impact of PCSOs on crime and disorder was limited and inconsistent, and it is difficult to make any definitive claims about whether PCSOs are effective as a way to reducing and preventing crime and disorder. It is important to note that in considering contributions to crime and disorder rates, the scope for PCSO contributions would largely be focussed on low level crimes and disorder.

The 2006 Home Office evaluation found that, based on recorded crime data in the case study areas 'it was not possible to discern any sustained differences in trends in the number of crimes between the areas with and without CSOs following their introduction' (Cooper et al., 2006: 28). These findings were based on incidents that were considered most likely to be affected by visible patrols such as ASB and low-level crimes including criminal damage, vehicle crime, violence against the person, burglary, and theft and robbery.

Similarly, Innes et al. as part of the evaluation of Welsh Government funded PCSOs (Innes et al., 2015) found that assessing the impact on levels of recorded crime and ASB was difficult. The review highlights that crime rates were continuing to fall during the implementation period of Welsh Government funding for PCSOs and that there were no discernible differences between England (where there was no additional investment in PCSOs) and Wales in the overall trend of crime. As such they argue that that it is not possible to see any impact of PCSOs on crime rates in Wales but also highlight that assessing changes in the overall crime rate is a blunt tool as an outcome measure. What the review did find however, is that while it was not possible to discern any clear impacts on levels of ASB, it was apparent that PCSOs were increasingly taking the leading in responding to disorder, ASB and non-crime calls. The review concluded that this could be interpreted as both a positive and a negative: 'On the one hand it serves to free up police officers' time. On the other, it constrains the ability of CSOs to conduct engagement work to some degree' (2015: 71).

Other evidence identified includes attempts to assess the impact of PCSOs in the early 2000s which are summarised by Oldfield (2021). In 2002 Crawford and Lister (cited in Oldfield, 2021) undertook work which claimed that PCSOs had a significant impact on crime reduction, however as Oldfield notes, this work did not include any comparison sites against which to compare or attempts to take into account other factors. Building on this Oldfield highlights the work of Harrigton et al. in 2005 which did include comparator sites and also found that PCSO presence was associated with a reduction in crime. In both cases however, Oldfield notes that these PCSO interventions consisted of PCSO deployment into 'crime hot spot' areas, linking to thinking that PCSOs can have an impact if deployed effectively.

In considering the contributions of PCSOs when deployed as part of a hot spot approach specifically, there is some evidence although as with the evidence more broadly, it is inconsistent. Ariel et al. (2016) used a method which involved 72 hot spot locations randomly separated into 34 treatment sites and 38 controls, in which treatment consisted of increased foot patrol by PCSOs. They found that treatment sites exhibited reduced crime

and a reduction in emergency calls, as well as reductions in surrounding areas suggesting a diffusion of benefits rather than displacement crime. It was also claimed that results suggested that a greater number of discrete PCSO visits may yield more crime reduction benefits than longer durations of visits.

Conversely research published by the college of policing (College of Policing, 2024) found that deploying police community support officer in micro hot spots in Sheffield had no effect in reducing crime. The study involved 8 ‘micro hot spots’ (an area no bigger than 50 meters by 50 meters), which were then matched into four pairs according to their levels of crime and incidents, with assignment of treatment and control conditions. The study found that treatment hot spots saw higher levels of crime and incidents compared to the control hot spot. In looking to explain this result, the authors claimed that the exact reasons were beyond the scope of the study but may be due to a lack of perceived deterrent effect of PCSOs or due to increased public confidence in reporting incidents to the police.

An evaluation of the ‘think Family Early Intervention programme’ which is an early intervention scheme in which PCSOs work with vulnerable families who are below threshold for receiving support from the council or social services but still require support and is aimed at preventing an escalation of offending. The evaluation showed a reduction in domestic violence, crime and youth crime for families, but this was based upon an assessment before and after the intervention and there was no comparison with a control group, so caution is required in interpreting the findings. While there was evidence of reductions in crime there were issues identified in the process including whether it was appropriate that the police should be taking the lead with the programme and whether PCSOs had appropriate training as part of the work. (Bradbury-Jones et al., 2021)

3.14. Recruitment and diversity

Another rationale for the introduction of PCSOs identified in the available literature was the potential to help diversify the police workforce and to help police forces recruit staff that are more representative of the communities they serve. As with other potential contributions of PCSOs, the existing evidence base is inconclusive.

In the early period after their introduction there was positive evidence that PCSOs were attracting a more diverse range of individuals, and that this was assisting in making neighbourhood policing staff more reflective of the communities they were operating in. The 2006 evaluation of PCSOs found that ‘CSOs were more diverse in particular in terms of ethnicity than other groups in the police services. A higher proportion of CSOs (15%) were from a minority ethnic background than were other police staff (6%), police officers (4%) or new recruits (6%).’ (Cooper et al., 2006: 44). The evaluation also found that a higher proportion of PCSOs were female compared to police officers, and also attracted a more even distribution of ages, including larger proportions of those under 25 and those over 55. In considering why people became PCSOs, older joiners and female joiners said the working culture of PCSOs was more appealing than that of a regular officer. Around 40 percent of PCSOs joined because they say the role as an entry point to becoming a police officer, a finding more likely to apply to men and those aged under 35 (Cooper et al., 2006).

Similarly, when considering the implementation of PCSOs as part of the Metropolitan Police Service, Johnson (2006) argued that PCSOs were important components in the aim of

police diversification. Firstly, they added directly to the diversity of the police force as a whole, and secondly, through the process of PCSOs applying to become regular officers will assist in diversifying police officers in the longer term. In considering evidence of this, Johnson found that the 'PCSO selection and recruitment process proved successful in attracting groups currently underrepresented in the MPS' (Johnson, 2005: 13). However, Johnson also found that there were numerous issues with the recruitment process, including rushed implementation, poor training and support, and that 'minority ethnic PCSOs were more disadvantaged than their white counterparts in this regard' (Johnson, 2006: 15).

These findings are consistent with findings of Cunningham and Wagstaff's (2006) analysis of police workforce data in the MPS. They found that there were proportionally more PCSOs in older and young age categories when compared to police officers and also a higher proportion of PCSOs from BME communities but found little evidence of differences in gender. In terms of motivations to become a PCSO, as with the Cooper et al, Cunningham and Wagstaff found that motivations varied. PCSOs who were female, older and those of Black African origin commonly reported that they appreciated the community aspect of the role. Conversely others were motivated to join as a stepping stone to become a police officer and as with Cooper et al, this was particularly true of those who were male and younger. Echoing Johnsons arguments, Cunningham and Wagstaff also found evidence that the pool of PCSOs who leave the role to become police officers is more diverse than for other police officer recruitment routes.

It is worth noting that the evidence above largely relates to periods of time shortly after the introduction of PCSOs, and more recent evidence suggests that periods of austerity and a tightening of police recruitment may have had an impact on PCSO recruitment. Firstly, Oldfield notes that in recent times greater emphasis has been placed PCSOs as a route to becoming a police officer, noting that 'an unintended consequence of this resulted in younger applicants with ambitious career aspirations, undermining the whole long term commitment ethos the proposes' (Oldfield, 2021: 11). Such a finding is echoed by O'Neill (2014b) in which she notes that an increasingly common motivator to become a PCSO was younger individuals with aspirations of joining the police being advised to become a PCSO in order to gain experience. Indeed, as previously noted O'Neill et al. described PCSOs being viewed as 'a training ground for future police officers' (2022: 11).

The issue of PCSOs being seen as a stepping stone to becoming a police officer is not necessarily an issue if the PCSO role continues to attract a more diverse pool of candidates, through which forces may be able to increase the diversity of their police officer workforce as seen early on in the implementation (Johnson, 2005; Cunnigham and Wagstaff, 2006). However, there is some limited evidence to suggest that this positioning of PCSOs as a route to becoming a police officer is possibly affecting the diversity of the candidate pool. This is evident in the 2015 Welsh Government review of PCSOs in which it is argued that 'because of how the CSO role has increasingly been cast by forces as a 'stepping stone' into joining the police service, rather than a distinctive role in its own right, this impacted upon the type of individuals who applied for the Welsh Government posts' (Innes et al. 2015: 72).

O'Neill also notes that older PCSOs tended to have greater levels of social and human capital given their previous life experiences and that the continued emphasis on PCSO as a

stepping stone is skewing the PCSO workforce towards younger recruits ‘with fewer life experiences supporting them when faced with challenging people or situations’ (2014b: 24). In addition, and as discussed earlier, this framing of the PCSO role as a route to gain experience to become a police officer, has also been argued to encourage PCSOs to adopt police support focussed role as well as encourage PCSO turnover which reduces attempts to build long term community engagement (O’Neill, 2014b; O’Neill et al. 2022, and Innes et al. 2015).

In terms of more recent evidence of workforce diversity, a report by Hales (2020) has found that at a national level, levels of diversity within PCSOs have been falling. Hale argues that such a trend should be treated cautiously and may be reflective of substantial cuts to the PCSO workforce in the Metropolitan Police Service which was a major driver of diversity in PCSO numbers.

There was also some limited evidence to suggest that one of the issues relating to PCSOs was an absence of progression opportunities, with the only real route for progression being to become a police officer (Cooper et al, 2006; Oldfield, 2021; O’Neill, 2014b). O’Neill (2014b) argues that more consideration should be given to the professional development of PCSOs to encourage greater retention of PCSOs to prevent the loss of social capital and potential implications for efforts to build and maintain community relations. This is similarly noted in the 2006 evaluation (cooper et al, 2006) and the 2015 evaluation of PCSOs in Wales (Lowes et al, 2015).

4. Focus groups with PCSOs and Neighbourhood Police Officers

4.1. Introduction and rationale

With the exception of the 2015 Welsh Government funded evaluation the findings of the literature review, while applicable to PCSOs in general, lacked a narrative of PCSOs in Wales. It was necessary to conduct primary data collection to understand the experiences of PCSOs working within Welsh police forces. Doing so would add to the existing literature surrounding PCSOs and add much needed insights into how the findings of the literature review relate to the Welsh policing landscape. As mentioned earlier in this review, the Welsh Government provides funding for additional PCSOs in Wales, and a such there may be different approaches and organisational culture surrounding the use of PCSO roles that may not be addressed in the current literature.

It is important to note that these focus groups featured eight PCSOs and eight neighbourhood police officers and did not include chief officers or non-neighbourhood policing staff who may have differing perceptions or opinions of the PCSO role. As such, the focus groups themselves were limited in scope and should not be used to generalise the PCSO role across Wales.

4.2. Findings

4.2.1. Motivations to become a PCSO

The findings of the literature review indicated that the motivations for becoming a PCSO may have an effect on how PCSOs approach their work, what type of experiences they look to get out of their role and their career aspirations. Respondents were asked what they felt motivates people to become a PCSO the responses were largely consistent amongst both groups, including a desire to build community connections, the perceived stability of the role, and the potential to become a police officer.

4.2.1.1. Serving communities

Several of the respondents were quick to respond that they felt motivated to become a PCSO through a strong desire to serve their local communities. Respondents indicated that particularly those with strong social skills who enjoyed speaking with people and forming new social connections were attracted to the job as they viewed it as a way to make a positive impact on their local communities and be a source of support, particularly for vulnerable people:

> “Some people become a PCSO because you really want to help people who are vulnerable. You want - you want to be a positive impact on your community. You want to be the type of person that makes a difference.” – CSO.

> “I'm a career PCSO, like working in the community is like a passion of mine. And I think you do go into it with a slightly different mindset. You're like, you're here to stay. So you're like, what can I do that's going to make a lasting difference?” – PCSO.

4.2.1.2. Career progression and retention

The use of the PCSO role as an alternative route (or "stepping stone") into policing was a key theme in responses. Respondents were prompted to discuss if the wider perception of the role as a step towards a policing career affected the kind of applicants to the role and if this was evident in the approach of career PCSOs and those who wished to go on to becoming a police officer. In line with the literature review respondents mentioned that those joining with the intention to become a police officer tended to be younger people who may not have developed the social capital put forward by O'Neill (2014) as important in PCSO work:

> "Yeah, I think we've touched on it earlier as a lot of the younger generation are coming into the job as a stepping stone into the police. Maybe they feel that the age of 18-19, they aren't ready for the police, so they just use it as a stepping stone and that's why we've got quite a bit of a turn around with PCSOs then becoming PCs." – Neighbourhood Police Officer.

Responses to this approach as a method of recruiting PCSOs were largely negative, with respondents feeling that this "devalued" the role in the sense that communities were missing out of experienced PCSOs because of resultant turnover rate of PCSOs to police officer. The high turnover rates of PCSOs to police officers is noted in the literature review and respondents were asked if this had led to a wider belief that becoming a PCSO was seen as a short-term career. One respondent shared that within their force, advancing to a PC role was seen as a progressional step that came after a certain amount of time in role and proving yourself to higher ups, rather than seeing PCSOs as a distinct career in itself.

According to respondents, the recruitment approach of using the PCSO role to entice would-be police officers also impacted the way in which their day-to-day work is carried out and how they operated at a community level. Respondents suggested that PCSOs hoping to become police officers were more likely to overlook the more community-focused aspects of the role, such as foot patrols and school visits, in favour of the "action" of "blue light" jobs and assisting policing colleagues.

Respondents throughout the focus groups discussed the importance of strong communication skills in PCSOs. As well as being essential to carrying out day-to-day tasks and deal directly with people of different backgrounds, respondents felt that this was also important as they often carried out work that police officer colleagues couldn't, such as checking in on victims of crime. It was noted in several responses that recruiting young people or those only interested in becoming police officers meant that these interpersonal skills were not always as developed in new PCSOs.

Beyond this, respondents highlighted the issues around progression within the role itself, both in terms of qualifications and renumeration, as a reason for high turnover rates and may also be a factor in people's decision to apply for PCSO roles:

> "you know that you're never going to advance beyond a certain pay point and you kind of have to factor that into, you know, your lifestyle decisions, can I afford to buy a house with that? Can I afford to have kids with that? So I think that's definitely something that does put people off the role for sure" – PCSO

> “the difference between a highest paid PCSO and the highest paid PC depending on length of service is massive. So I think that's a big determining factor, especially what we see here from a lot that have joined recently and left. It's often the money as well for what you do is a is a massive factor.” – PC

4.2.2. The Role and Contributions of PCSOs

Acknowledging the varied roles that PCSOs can provide identified in the literature, respondents were asked to describe the work that they carry out as part of their role to help understand what the role looks like in Wales. Particularly in the case of Wales, the response captured the different challenges faced by those working in areas with different demographic and geographic characteristics, in particular the differing nature and needs of urban and rural communities. As expected from the literature review, there was no fixed example that could be given of a “typical” day of work for a PCSO, highlighting the need to maintain flexibility and a high degree of autonomy.

4.2.2.1. Community engagement

Both Neighbourhood Police Officers and PCSOs agreed that the primary purpose of the role is to engage with the public. Particularly through maintaining a visible presence in their community. Foot patrols were considered essential in order to achieve this, while also making it possible to grasp opportunities to develop local knowledge and gather intelligence through conversations with members of the public:

> “If you like chatting, it's ideal because especially with like building intelligence, you know you'll go out and if you love a chat, they'll tell you stuff and you're not even expecting them to tell you. And that's where the intelligence comes. And that's just from having a chat.” – PCSO

> “PCs used to have, you know, tremendous amount of local knowledge, know that's been passed on to the PCSO because we all know what's happening to the PCs.” – PC

> “They're doing what police officers used to do, you know, back in the day, which was patrolling the beat, you know, being out there being visible” – PC

The activities carried out while on foot patrol varied depending on the officer’s location. One PCSO who worked in a city centre described their day-to-day work as largely consisting of safeguarding, helping people in their “patch” with issues such as homelessness, addiction and mental health support, in many cases dealing with the same people on a regular basis. In this case, their foot patrols involved meeting with known persons in the area and offering practical support such as making referrals to mental health support services or hostels. In addition to this, being in a high-density population area meant that they were often the first on the scene to incidents and provided the first police presence to members of the public.

Respondents working in forces that cover more rural areas, such a Dyfed Powys and North Wales, were more likely to discuss the necessity of visibility in building strong relationships within the community and establishing trust in the police, offering help and support to people who might not otherwise approach the police directly:

> “Obviously we see a lot of vulnerable people and I hear quite a lot that they don't want to report on the 101 system. There's not much trust in it or they can't get through. They get frustrated or they, they can't do it online, obviously because they've got no internet. They're just that age, sometimes rural communities lacking internet, things like that.” – PCSO

Respondents also discussed their participation in community events and awareness campaigns and the effect that these have on the areas they support. PCSOs discussed the importance of getting involved with schools and community groups in building relationships with children and young people, and how these relationships can be instrumental in gathering intelligence and even helping to resolve police matters:

> “you walk into a local youth club as the PCSO and all the kids will get out the phone and they'll find out where that young person is, because you've been there long enough that they trust you.” – PCSO

Additionally, police officers saw the community engagement work carried out by PCSOs as necessary to replace the work that would previously have been carried out by PCs, but is no longer possible for them due to high workloads and a lack of resourcing:

> “I might get dragged off to do some response work. My role is very different, but I think without the PCSOs it would just completely fall apart because they are the eyes, they're the ears, they know everything, they know their problems.” – PC

> “I would say good PCSO-ing is quite like old fashioned policing, you know, you know who everybody is, and you know who their mum is, so you can call their mum if they're causing trouble. I think once you do have that relationship within the community. You can work a lot more on the prevention side. You know identifying issues before they become an issue for the police.” – PCSO

4.2.2.2. De-escalation and crime prevention

Throughout the focus groups discussions about respondent’s daily activities as PCSOs often led to examples of how their actions helped to de-escalate situations and potentially prevent crime from occurring and reducing strain on response officers. It is important to note that this section should be interpreted with caution, as without suitable metrics designed to measure outcomes of PCSO engagement as discussed in the literature review, it would be difficult to say that PCSOs are directly responsible for reductions in crime or that every situation in which a PCSO intervenes would otherwise become a criminal matter. When prompted to discuss the role of PCSOs in dealing with hate crime, respondents discussed this largely in the context of their role in providing education and support to communities.

> “we have PCSOs from each area that are nominated to be hate crime champions. So as part of that role they have to contact the victims of hate crime at certain points. You know, I think it's 14 days after the incident, maybe 28 days after. And offer support and sort of that knowledge of what groups are available to that victim if they want the support. I think that's a really important role that we play” – PCSO

> “We do education sessions in youth clubs, in schools, with our elderly about what hate crime looks like” – PCSO

Both PCSOs and neighbourhood officers felt that PCSOs regularly prevent situations from escalating to the point where a police officer may need to be called. The level of this intervention varied. For some this was about being available as a first point of contact for people needing immediate support:

> “it's just about prevention really. You know, if you're there you prevent these things happening before they occur. We might see if those sorts of instances happen, you know, hate crime or sexual offences or whatever, and we're the first on scene” – PCSO

In other situations, respondents spoke about utilising local knowledge and facilitating community activities to deal directly with antisocial behaviour and people at risk of becoming involved in criminal activity, particularly in cases of children and young people:

> “I launched a boxing scheme […] where young people could come on a weekly basis for 10 weeks, it was funded by a partner agency […]. They provided funds and £100 a night for a qualified boxing coach and they fed the young people after the session, it was in collaboration with the NP team. So, each week there would be a 10-15 minute session on, it could be knife crime, it could be county lines, it might be scams or, you know, safe Internet use, but it would it provided reachable moments.” – PCSO

4.2.2.3. Policing support

As identified in the literature review and from the focus group respondents, a key part of the PCSO role is to provide support to forces in developing local community relationships and knowledge and acting as a link between the public and wider policing service. However, as mentioned previously in the literature review, the ability of PCSOs to do such work can be constrained if too much of their time is reallocated to more reactive tasking. In recognition of this, respondents were asked to discuss the amount of time spent carrying out reactive functions and supporting police colleagues in their daily work.

Throughout both focus groups there were discussions about the dependence on PCSOs as the first respondents to incidents that require a police presence, securing areas, reassuring victims of crime and identifying potential witnesses while waiting for police officers to arrive on scene. Discussions around these scenarios were positive, as they were seen by respondents as a necessary part of the job and provided an opportunity to help members of the public in need. However, the frequency of call outs of PCSOs to help support police colleagues in reactive functions was seen as a barrier to carrying out other PCSO functions, as discussed further down in this report.

Being able to support police by providing intelligence was seen as a relatively positive aspect of the role, with PCSOs being able to utilise their skills and social capital with the community to actively support functions that keep those communities safe. This sentiment was echoed by the neighbourhood police officers at the focus groups who considered the community links of PCSOs an essential part of police response and investigations:

> “First on scene, often to quite sort of challenging difficult incidents to deal with. Providing that reassurance and sort of building Intel with different people, suspects, witnesses, victims. So, yeah, really good key role to the sort of policing organisation.” – PC

Respondents also reported that PCSOs’ experiences with the public were vastly different to those of police officers, in large part thanks to the community-focussed work that they carry out as part of their duties, which makes them a safe figure or familiar face to talk to, which can help with intelligence gathering to support the wider police force:

> “People are more likely to trust PCSOs more than they will police officers. I've got quite a few people that pretty much have said to my face, “I hate police, but I'll speak to you” and I think that is a really important part of the PCSO world because we have those different powers and different responsibilities. People can see us as sometimes less of a threat if they consider the police a threat. So people are much more willing to engage with us and talk with us.” – PCSO

> “When I do have to attend, or I go to calls, I try and go out with my PCSOs. They, they've already kind of broken down that barrier for me. So they by extension start to trust me, which is brilliant and it’s really, really helpful, especially if I have to go out to things on my own.” – PC

Respondents also shared examples of providing a direct link between the public and police investigations, by providing victim support through visiting people in their homes and signposting to support services, to contacting departments within police forces to provide victims of crime with updates on investigative processes where police officers have not had the resourcing to be able to do so. This element of PCSO work appears to be largely overlooked in existing literature but is likely an essential part of establishing public confidence and trust in policing:

> “They don't have a phone. They they're not confident with the computer. It's nice at that moment. We can take that time to sit with them and just have a chat and go through it, you know, in their own time, especially those with additional needs” – PCSO

> “And we can keep people up to date with what's happening if they haven't heard, or they get - some people get frustrated because they're not hearing anything back. So we're like, we can be that link and find out which officers that dealt with them and grab the updates that way” – PCSO

4.2.3. Facilitators and barriers of PCSO work

4.2.3.1. Autonomy

Given the varied nature of their work, an emergent theme from the focus groups was that of the benefit of PCSOs having at least some autonomy (within the individual needs of the wider police force) over their workday and the projects that they engage with. As mentioned further in this report, despite this flexibility, PCSOs can and are often called away from their planned schedules due to being needed elsewhere.

Respondents talked about the freedom that they had to manage their own workloads and that this allowed them to take a more dynamic approach to their daily tasks, allowing them to carry out targeted work that they feel would best benefit the local area:

> “The role is really, really varied and when I was in training, people would say to me, you know, you make you make the PCSO role, you know, you can make it, you can be as busy as you want to be.” – PCSO

> “Quite a lot of what we do is we're out and about sort of reassuring people while they're travelling to and from work or to and from school” – PCSO

This flexible approach to the role also allows PCSOs to engage in partnership working with other community and charitable organisations and public bodies, such as local councils. Throughout the focus groups respondents mentioned examples of referring people to these kinds of organisations not only as a method of getting immediate support to at-risk individuals through existing services, such as hostel referrals mentioned by a city centre-based PCSO but also in order to establish and develop community engagement schemes, such as the boxing scheme mentioned earlier.

4.2.3.2. Powers

When prompted to discuss whether the powers afforded to PCSOs were sufficient to carry out their role, respondent’s shared mixed opinions. Many respondents felt that they had sufficient powers to carry out their duties. A smaller number of respondents felt that current PCSO powers were not sufficient but were cautious about increasing powers as there could be a risk of abstraction if PCSOs were able to carry out functions currently reserved to police officers.

One PCSO said that they preferred having a smaller range of powers as it allowed them to spend more time developing their expertise and experience in their own areas of work. This was echoed by another PCSO who suggested that having fewer powers than police officers meant that they have to develop their own “toolbox” in order to carry out their duties, relying more on their communication skills than enforcement to resolve issues. There were also instances throughout the focus groups of PCSOs being better able to gather intelligence than police officers specifically because they did not have the same powers and as a result were better able to develop relationships with communities:

> “People can see us as sometimes less of a threat if they consider the police a threat.” – PCSO

However, some respondents expressed frustration around the varying powers that PCSOs have, particularly at the differences in powers between different police forces which one respondent said can cause confusion among the public about what powers PCSOs do have. One respondent also raised that continuing widespread changes in the powers available to PCSOs is another barrier preventing them from carrying out their roles effectively:

> “Power has been taken away from PCSOs in recent years. So being able to deal with things more dynamically there and then, for example fixed penalty notices for, you know, different things like public order, dog fouling that sort of thing,

> things that they do come across on their day-to-day. But unfortunately, they're not able to deal with them as dynamically as they used to in the past […] I know there have been recently more powers given to them in regards to obviously being able to issue like section 59 notices and stuff like that. However, over the years I think more has been taken away than been given to them". – PC

Another barrier was the inability to allow PCSOs to take statements from members of the public, despite often being first on scene to incidents as mentioned earlier in this report:

> "PCSOs unable to take simple statements regarding thefts or whatever. I feel that they want that type of power and that responsibility." – PC

> "However, we do have a sort of limited involvement when it comes to the investigative process. I understand we're not police officers. But for us, just within Wales, not the BTP as a whole. We don't sort of take witness statements. We do our own witness statements. We don't really follow through with any low-level crime." – PCSO

> "If you're a victim of crime and we were taking your witness statement, then I think that's a prime opportunity to build a good relationship with them." - PCSO

One respondent did share an example in which increasing powers available to PCSOs has helped to reduce demand on police officers and may be an effective tool in dealing with localised issues. A PCSO based in North Wales raised that they have recently been given powers to issue community resolutions and that this was effective in generating positive outcomes without needing to involve police officers or the court system, thereby reducing demand on these services.

4.2.3.3. Training

Training was another area where respondents reported a high degree of variation dependent on which force they were based in. One PCSO said that they received ten weeks of basic training at the start of the career whereas another said that they received eight. Some respondents felt that while this basic training provided them with sufficient knowledge about procedures and the powers available to them, it was not possible to gain a meaningful understanding of the requirements the role until they were assigned to an area and began carrying out their duties:

> "I think one thing that became apparent just in my experience is that training is great because you meet loads and loads of people and have loads of inputs from all these different departments. But I feel like you don't really learn what all these departments are and what they do and how they're useful to you until you're out and about and doing the job." – PCSO

However, the responses surrounding ongoing or refresher training were more negative, respondents who discussed the topic felt that there was a lack of opportunities available:

> "If it's been 2 years since you've done the course and you forget little things, which could be sort of vital to, you know, the role of sort of PCSO or police officer." – PC

4.2.3.4. Abstraction and resourcing

The literature review found evidence of PCSOs and the police service in general experiencing financial and resourcing pressures. A question was included in the discussion guide for the focus groups specifically asking if respondents had noticed any changes to their daily work as a result of resource pressures. As well as this, there were major themes of resourcing as a barrier to effective PCSO work throughout discussions, including issues of abstraction, lack of equipment and staffing levels. Noting the recent reductions in Welsh Government funding provided to Welsh police forces, respondents were prompted to comment on how this affected them in their role, however discussions tended to focus on resourcing issues more broadly.

Several respondents in the focus groups noted that abstraction was becoming a key barrier in carrying out their daily work. This was noted not only by the PCSOs in the groups but also the participating neighbourhood police officers. Some respondents talked about how the nature of abstraction conflicted with the commitments or powers of PCSOs. The findings earlier in this review identified abstraction as an issue due to PCSOs carrying out work that would not normally fall within the scope of the role, in part due to pressures on policing colleagues, and respondents did identify this as an issue as well:

> “Again, abstractions. Because of lack of police, a PCSO has been sent to calls that they really shouldn't be sent to.” – PC

> “Due to the lack of staffing on response PCSOs are often asked to deal with instances that response officers would usually be dealing with.” – PC

Within the focus groups, attitudes towards abstraction were largely negative, though most respondents approached abstraction as an unavoidable and sometimes necessary part of the job. Some respondents also gave examples of how abstraction is not only an issue for policing staff but had wider-reaching implications for community-based work. These responses suggested that the wider issue was that PCSOs are deployed to carry out other duties at short notice, making it difficult to plan and attend to work in their communities and potentially causing issues with establishing working partnerships.

Some respondents discussed the pressures they felt under to balance the commitments of PCSO workloads with supporting caseloads of police officer colleagues due to staffing shortages. Respondents discussed how they aren’t able to be out as often on foot patrols or interacting with communities because they are required to pick up administrative work that police officers don’t have time to carry out themselves. In addition to this, respondents suggested the gradual reduction of PCSOs has meant that staff are under even more pressure to complete this work with fewer staff.

> “In my station there used to be four full time PCSOs here and now it's just me full time and I've got one other PCSO here part time with me. So obviously increasing your sort of case workload.” – PCSO

In addition to issues caused by staffing shortages, some respondents discussed how a lack of available equipment due to funding issues was causing them to struggle to carry out their work effectively and was leading to delays in helping members of the public or even having to cancel community engagement activities. Respondents described feeling frustrated at

times at being left without necessary equipment, ranging from suitable vehicles not being available to a lack of office equipment. Respondents indicated that in addition to causing operational difficulties, these issues had an impact on PCSOs and the wider police force's reputation within communities. Consistent with the literature, access to vehicles was seen to be particularly important when considering community engagement in more rural areas, or when working across geographically dispersed communities:

> "There are some areas that are easily accessible on foot. There are others where we need a vehicle, whether that's public transport, whether that's a bike or whether it's an actual vehicle. We went through a period whereby we were told CSOs were not to use vehicles, which was really, really difficult." – PCSO

The long-term impact of these resourcing issues could potentially cause difficulties for future PCSO work which, as noted earlier, is reliant on the trust and cooperation of communities in order to function effectively.

5. Conclusions

The purpose of this review was to explore the contributions, activities and use of PCSOs in Wales through a literature review and series of focus groups with PCSOs and neighbourhood police officers. Given the limitations of the scope of the review, the authors were not able to provide an evaluation or assessment of the impact of PCSOs, individual practices or Welsh Government funding. Instead, this review aims to identify what the literature says about the possible contributions of PCSOs to people and communities, what helps or hinders these contributions and a consideration of how that evidence may translate to the experiences of PCSOs working in Wales. The initial literature search for the review revealed that there was little evidence available exploring the role of PCSO within police forces in the UK, and less again that focussed specifically on the role in a Welsh context. Acknowledging this limitation, the review was carried out to identify key themes of PCSO work across England and Wales and where there may be further opportunities to investigate and expand on existing research.

The findings of the literature highlighted a divergence between Welsh Government and the Home Office's approach towards PCSOs, particularly following the change in the UK government in 2010 and in response to subsequent austerity measures that were put in place. In Wales, the Welsh Government's commitment to supporting neighbourhood policing meant that having highly visible policing staff to provide additional capacity and relief for police officers was a priority area. According to Lowe et al, (2015) the additional funding of PCSOs in Wales was successful in achieving these aims.

The findings of the literature review were able to provide more context of the roles and activities carried out by PCSOs, though it did also highlight that day-to-day activities were likely to differ between individual PCSOs (Lowe et al, 2015). There were several reasons given for these differences from individual differences in PCSOs (Sutherland, 2014), the priorities of individual forces and the wider police force (college of policing, 2022) and the needs of local communities (O'Neill, 2014). Because of this variation, it is difficult to pin down the activities of what a PCSO should or could do as part of their job, but it was recognised that they are engaged in range of activities that can have a wide range of aims. The findings of the focus groups showed that this variation in PCSO activity appears to be true for those PCSOs working in Wales. Where some respondents shared their experiences of organising community events and programs aimed at improving outcomes for local people, others described their daily work as reactionary, responding to calls and focused on foot patrols, particularly in built up areas such as city centres. Respondents discussed having multiple different responsibilities, including carrying out foot patrols, organising community programs, safeguarding and signposting, supporting victims of crime and assisting police officer colleagues with carrying out investigations.

The literature review found consistent emphasis on the PCSO role as primarily focused on visibility and community engagement, but as noted above, the ways in which that engagement was carried out varied, particularly in rural areas where the viability and effectiveness of foot patrols was dependent on the size of the area covered (Oldfield, 2021). The focus groups identified that this sentiment is echoed throughout forces, but that the

practicalities of doing so were often overlooked. Respondents shared several examples of experiencing barriers when trying to carry out engagement work in their daily activities, and many of these were due to a lack of resourcing. The responses from the focus groups highlighted the effect of funding pressures not only in terms of staffing, as recognised in the literature review, but also of more practical resources such as vehicles and equipment.

Noting the wide variety of activities that PCSOs are engaged in, and the various contexts and situations in which they operate, both the literature review and focus groups showed that PCSOs can have a wide range of contributions to local communities and police forces. Sutherland's (2014) investigations of PCSOs in Cambridgeshire found that the public were in support of PCSOs, and valued them as friendly and approachable, a point that had previously been noted by the Home Office (Cooper et al., 2006) and Casey (2008), noting that PCSOs were perceived as approachable, reassuring, and a deterrent of crime. There were mixed opinions on public perception of PCSO powers, both reports, along with Oldfield (2021) found that people would prefer the visibility of officers with greater powers. However, Grieg-Midlane (2014) and O'Neill (2014a) argued that the limited powers of PCSOs were beneficial in facilitating different relationship with communities, allowing the establishment of greater trust and assists in PCSOs building social capital. The experiences of the PCSOs and PCs who took part in the focus group sessions echoed the latter, who made comments about being better able to gather intelligence through conversations or being approached by members of the public because they weren't police officers and therefore were perceived to be less of a threat. These findings would suggest that PCSOs are contributing to the establishment of public trust in policing, though some responses from the focus groups showed frustration at the extent to which this could be utilised, with some respondents expressing frustration at not being able to assist with public facing tasks such as taking witness statements, arguing that witnesses and victims may speak more freely with a PCSO as opposed to a police officer.

The literature review highlighted that there is a limited availability of literature which allow firm conclusions of the relationship between PCSOs and crime reduction. Moreover, given the complex nature of criminality, its causes and its reporting, it is difficult to explore this relationship and as Lowes et al (2015) argue it remains a blunt measure when considering the value of PCSOs. There was some evidence to suggest that the presence of PCSOs on foot patrol resulted in fewer emergency calls being made (Ariel et al., 2016) not only in the patrol areas but surrounding areas too. However, the scope of this research was limited. Responses within the focus groups indicated that PCSOs felt that the work that they carried out was responsible for reducing crime in the communities that they served and was particularly effective in deterring crime related to antisocial behaviour and drugs. However, given the complexities noted above it is not possible to determine how many situations in which a PCSO intervenes would otherwise have resulted in criminal activity, and less possible still to know if that activity would have been reported to the police, thus contributing to local crime statistics.

One of the rationales identified for the implementation of PCSOs was the potential for the role to increase diversity and representation in the police force. There was evidence to suggest that PCSOs are more diverse in terms of age, gender and ethnicity than policing

counterparts, indicating that the introduction of PCSOs may have been successful in this regard. However, much of this evidence relates to the earlier periods of PCSO implementation and the evidence from the literature suggest that the wider context of police recruitment may be altering the types of people applying to be a PCSO. It was noted that increasingly there has been a move to promote of the PCSO role as a “stepping stone” into policing, resulting in a younger, less diverse pool of applicants and that this had longer term effects on the longevity and ethos of the role (Cooper et al, 2006, Oldfield, 2021). This was put forward to participants during the focus groups, who observed that younger applicants were more likely to become PCSOs as a route to becoming a police officer, due to lacking suitable qualifications to apply directly, and were less likely to value to the community support aspect on the role in favour of supporting police functions. Respondents did not comment on the role as an opportunity for more ethnically diverse candidates; however, it should be noted this was also not included as a prompt during the focus group sessions.

The literature review also highlighted the importance of PCSOs in neighbourhood policing and that as such the role is likely to be interwoven with the documented wider contributions of neighbourhood policing towards community engagement, trust, confidence and perceptions of police legitimacy (Mackenzie, 2009; Colover & Quinton, 2018). As it was not in the scope of this review to investigate the role of neighbourhood policing, it is not possible to determine to what level PCSOs contribute to this. However, the support that PCSOs provide to police functions and to police officer colleagues was a recurrent theme within both the literature review and the focus group findings. The Welsh Government’s (2015) review suggested that periods of austerity and subsequent reductions in staffing have meant that in some cases PCSOs may be carrying out more police support activities than community support activities, this was also supported by Higgins (2015). The focus group findings supported this, with respondents sharing that they often assisted with police functions as part of their role, particularly where PC colleagues did not have time to carry these out themselves.

Abstraction was a key theme identified in the literature review and identified as one of the biggest barriers to PCSOs carrying out effective community engagement work (O’Neill, 2014b). The removal of PCSOs from their usual neighbourhoods in order to provide support in other areas or to assist with administration work was interpreted by O’Neill as detrimental to community engagement work and undermined the relationships that PCSOs worked to develop within communities. As this review was not intended to evaluate current practices it is not possible to determine if abstraction does have a significant impact on community engagement. However, during the focus groups PCSOs did provide examples where abstraction interfered with planned community engagement work and how they felt that this made their role more difficult if they were called away from planned activities at short notice.

The overarching findings of this review would suggest that there is a need for more research to be carried out in order to better explore and describe the role of PCSOs in the context of Welsh policing and the impact that they have on Welsh communities. As noted much of the literature around PCSOs relates to England and caution should be used when making generalisations from this evidence about PCSOs in Wales given the differences in how PCSOs have continued to be funded. However, the existing literature has been useful in

providing a general framework surrounding the PCSO role and that types of activities that they carry out in their workdays and identifying areas in which to explore the contributions that they make to communities and wider policing. The findings presented from the focus groups lent context to the review through the experiences of neighbourhood policing teams in Welsh police forces and helped illustrate the roles and contributions that PCSOs are having to policing and communities in Wales.

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7. Annex A: Focus group discussion guide

Participants

[*Facilitator to note names of attendees*]

Introduction

Good morning/afternoon and thank you for finding the time to take part in this focus group. How are you today?

My name is [researcher] and I'm a researcher in the Knowledge and Analytical Services Division within Welsh Government, joining me on this call is my colleague [researcher]. Following recommendations by the Senedd Equality and Social Justice Committee we have been asked by the Community Safety Division within the Welsh Government to undertake a light touch review of PCSOs in Wales. Our aim is not to judge any individual practice, but to get a broader understanding of the types of work PCSOs do and the difference this makes to people and communities in Wales. It is expected that a more detailed piece of work will be undertaken in 2025 and 2026

As part of this work, we undertook a review of the literature relating to PCSOs in England and Wales. This review of the literature found a few key themes that we'd like to explore with you today to better understand their relevance to the work of PCSOs in Wales. Important areas that came out of the literature review included the motivations for why people became PCSOs, the day to day work of PCSOs and the balance between 'community support' and 'police support functions', the contributions of PCSOs to communities and local policing, and barriers and enablers of PCSO activity.

These theme will be used to guide today's discussions. This focus group will last approximately 60 minutes, but we have allowed up to 90 minutes to accommodate a longer discussion if needed. We should have a mix of PCSOs and Neighbourhood police officers, so when we ask about PCSO activity please feel free to talk about your own experiences but also your perceptions of PCSO work more broadly.

Please note that nothing you hear during this focus group should be taken as an indication of future Welsh Government or policing policy or decisions relating to PCSOs, our work is purely evidence building. The Welsh Government acknowledge that operational decisions about how PCSOs are used and deployed are the responsibility of the police. The questions included here are not meant to signify any value judgements about how PCSOs should be deployed, they have been chosen to help understand to what extent themes identified from the literature are relevant to the context of Wales.

I would like to kindly remind you not to share outside of this focus group any views and opinions phrased by other participants in a way that could identify them. Your participation is completely voluntary and if there is a question you don't want to answer you're not obliged to do so. Any insights or quotes used within research outputs will be fully anonymised.

Does anyone have any questions about this focus group or the research in general before we begin?

We also shared a Privacy Notice and Participation Form with you before the focus group. As stated in the form, we will transcribe and record this meeting for note-taking purposes, so I will now turn this on.

– START TRANSCRIPTION –

Warm-up

To get started, could everybody tell us their name, which force they are representing, and their job role? [*Facilitator to pick order of respondents*]

Questions

Motivations

What do you think motivates people to become a PCSO?

The role and contribution of PCSOs

How would you describe the roles and activities that PCSOs engage in over the course of their daily work?

How would you describe the impact that PCSOs have within the communities that they serve?

Barriers and enablers of PCSO work

What elements of current practice do you feel enable PCSOs to work most effectively?

What are the barriers currently faced by PCSOs?

What do you think, if any, have been the implications of reductions in funding to PCSOs in Wales?

Debrief

Are there any other relevant topics that you would like to discuss before we finish the focus group?

The next steps of project: To produce a summary report outlining the findings of the literature review and an overview of the discussions in these workshops. The report will be finalised in February/March and published not long afterwards on gov.wales. it is anticipated that there will be further research commissioned by the Welsh Government to more fully review the funding that Welsh Government provides for PCSO.