

Improving the Application and Assessment Experiences of Special Constable Candidates in England and Wales

Abstract

Purpose

This paper proposes a set of recommendations based upon the limitations found with the application and assessment process to become a Special Constable (SC) with one of the forty-three police forces in England and Wales.

Design/methodology/approach

Participants were recruited via online social media platforms Twitter and LinkedIn, as well as personal networks and was geared towards both respondents who had completed the whole of the application and assessment process, as well as those who may have withdrawn at a particular point or who failed an element of the assessment.

Findings

This study yielded several key findings. First, some respondents had limited to no knowledge of the role of the Special Constable, nor of the depth of police work that would be expected of them. Secondly, respondents indicated that they would have benefited from support during the application and assessment process, specifying the advantages that could be derived from a variety of sources such as local force input and workshop sessions. Finally, respondents stated that poor communication from recruiting teams impacted their experience of applying to the Special Constable programmes, causing them to rethink their decision to join.

Originality

This research proposes that a far greater input from serving Special Constables during the application and assessment process is key to improving the experiences of candidates, and to their chances of success with the programme.

Key words: Special Constables, police, application, assessment, recruitment, candidates

Introduction

The Special Constabulary has existed since 1831 when Parliament passed, “An act for amending the laws relative to the appointment of special constables, and for the better preservation of the police.” (College of Policing, 2020: p.1). As unpaid volunteers, Special Constables are tightly integrated and embedded within their chosen force, where they work, support and supplement (Wolf *et al.*, 2017) full-time officers. Alongside the external expertise that each SC brings to their force (National Police Chiefs’ Council, 2018) such as qualified firefighters, response drivers and medics (Callendar *et al.*, 2022), these officers offer the additional benefit of being representatives and ambassadors of the local communities (Pepper and Wolf, 2015; Newburn, 2008) that they will serve.

As warranted officers with the same full policing powers as regular officers, Special Constables are mostly indistinguishable from their paid counterparts (with some epaulettes denoting SC above their collar numbers) and contribute to all areas of front-line, operational police work (Ramshaw and Cosgrove, 2020). Each police force in England and Wales has their own Special Constabulary (Britton *et al.*, 2022), where volunteer officers, described by Haski-Leventhal and Bargal (2008) as the ‘backbone of civil society’, undertake a range of policing tasks as per the operational requirement and necessity of the force. The value of volunteer police officers (though utilised differently) can be seen around the world, with many policing organisations such as the French police proactively campaigning to recruit 30,000 (Thompson, 2022) reservist personnel, with a focus on community policing. Other international forces such as the Royal Canadian Mounted Police (RCMP) (2022) and Australian Federal Police (AFP) (2024) utilise their volunteers in differing ways – RCMP volunteers do not perform law enforcement or operational duties, whilst the AFP largely rely on former officers and specialist support staff to fill urgent gaps.

Literature review

Whilst there is a growing body of work surrounding SCs, it remains a relatively small field, though developing in a range of areas such as motivations, morale and retention of SCs (Callendar *et al.*, 2018), early career experiences (Britton *et al.*, 2022; Plimley and Krahenbuhl, 2019) and deployment, motivation and management (Bullock and Leeney, 2016). Additionally, Pepper (2022) looks towards a plethora of Police Support Volunteer (PSV) roles that exist within forces, such as administrative tasks, reviewing CCTV footage, puppy walking, as well as specialist operational functions, whilst Millie’s (2019) work, explores the lived experiences of police volunteers.

Whilst the PSV roles steer away from the Special Constabulary, there remains a clear link to citizens who give their time up freely to support and complement the duties of both officers and staff, hence the relevance of the work. Earlier work from Gravelle and Rogers (2010) corroborate the importance of police volunteers, citing both the positives gained from engaging with their communities, to the significant ‘real and robust’ economic benefits that can be derived from voluntary work. In a similar vein, Pepper and Rogers (2022) look to Volunteer Police Cadet (VPC) leaders as a source of both economic and social benefit to policing organisations.

The aforementioned works situate broader Special Constabulary and Police Support Volunteer literature, offering an understanding of the motivations, experiences and function of the voluntary police sector, however, little exists on the application and assessment experiences of SCs, and the associated pressures linked to the recruitment process. Some literature exists on the stages and recruitment standards (Hesketh and Stubbs, 2023) of the police (with a focus on diversity), whilst others recognise the support through the recruitment process via existing social networks (Stubbs *et al.*, 2023) with policing contacts. The College of Policing (2023) offer an overview of the sift and

online assessment processes (first published April 2023), which breaks down the expectations for each applicant and explores which of the competencies from the Competency Values Framework (CVF) are being assessed at each stage, and whilst useful, arguably does not offer the depth of understanding and explanation that all candidates will need. It is essential that all forces recognise the importance of supporting applicants fully – whether for a voluntary position or permanent role – and failure to do so, will potentially lead to quality candidates with much to give, slipping through the net.

Some 80 years ago, Townsend (1943: p.41) recognised that, “...the training and organisation of the Special Constabulary vary greatly from place to place for various reasons.” and refers to the likelihood that the voluntary sector will remain integral to the functioning of the police service, which clearly applies today. His comments hit home on two accounts (discussed further within this paper); first, the organisation of SC recruitment processes varies greatly between forces and secondly, willing volunteers giving their time to work as SCs remain vital to the operational successes of the police.

As of 31st March 2023 (Gov.uk, 2023) there are 6841 SCs serving across the forty-three forces in England and Wales, with the number of volunteer officers having significantly fallen (Britton, 2020) from a relative peak in 2012 where the figure was more than 20,000. The reduction of 13,000+ SCs represents a significant shift in the potential operational effectiveness of its volunteer force and when linked to data by Britton *et al.*, (2018) who state that in 2017, the Special Constabulary contributed 3.2 million hours of voluntary police work, underpins the value of SC staff. Delving further and based on the assumption that the ‘average’ person works circa 2,000 hours per year (35-40 hours per week), the broader Special Constabulary’s hourly contribution in 2017 was the equivalent of 1600 staff members or a force the size of Northamptonshire or Gwent (Statista, 2024). Thus, a rise in number of SCs, would have both a significant operational and economic benefit to policing organisations, hence the need for better application and assessment processes and experiences, to better recruit more willing volunteers and reduce the potential for failure and attrition rates.

This study seeks to present new knowledge directly linked to the challenges surrounding the application and assessment experiences of Special Constable candidates in England and Wales, adding to the developing body of work on SCs.

Methodology

This small-scale, predominantly qualitative based study, draws upon data generated from questionnaires distributed nationally (online), specifically targeting SC candidates. In total, $n = 103$ responses were returned, when sanitised left $n = 63$ that met the inclusion criteria. $N = 40$ responses were discounted due to surveys being left mostly blank or significantly incomplete, hence their value to the study was nil. The responding group consisted of 43 x male, 14 x female, 1 x non-binary, with five participants electing not to respond to the question. The recorded length of service from respondents ranged from 9 months to 42 years, with a broad age range of 18-75 years. Therefore, these results not only offer a good cross-section of age, gender and experience as Special Constables but can also speak to the different experiences of the application and assessment processes over the years.

No set framework or methodology was followed for questionnaire design or structure, but tick box and Likert style questions were used to gauge respondent’s attitudes and feelings against a particular question or statement. The online questionnaire containing 27 items consisted of two main parts: the first was used to measure the understanding of the SC role and the individual level of

preparedness of each candidate, whilst the latter was geared towards avenues of beneficial support and recommended improvements to the recruitment process from an applicant perspective. Whilst several questions asked candidates to select an option or options from a list, participants were encouraged to further their answers via the use of free text comments, offering the opportunity to add more depth via additional information and commentary (Rich *et al.*, 2013).

To increase the depth of understanding tied to the application and assessment experiences, purposive sampling (Campbell *et al.*, 2020; Sibona *et al.*, 2020) was used to engage with respondents most likely to yield useful and appropriate information and were directly linked to the aims and objectives of the study. Thus, the survey directly targeted participants who met one of the three following eligibility criteria: 1) they had fully completed the application and assessment process to become a SC, 2) they had failed one of the stages of assessment or 3) they had elected to withdraw from the application or assessment process for personal reasons.

Of the 63 responses, $n = 7$ did not fully complete the process to become a Special Constable. $N = 1$ chose to withdraw at the interview phase, whilst $n = 2$ chose to withdraw their applications at the bleep test citing mental health challenges as potential barriers to their success at the time. Of those who failed an element of the process, $n = 1$ failed the fitness test, $n = 1$ failed the values-based questionnaire, $n = 1$ failed the interview and $n = 1$ failed the final vetting element.

To gain insight from a broad spectrum of society, an online Qualtrics questionnaire was chosen as the survey platform (Boas *et al.*, 2018) to allow an identical questionnaire to be sent to all potential participants that were targeted via social media – in particular Twitter (Wasilewski, *et al.* 2019) and LinkedIn (Stokes *et al.*, 2019). Whilst the Special Constabulary receive an estimated 16,500 applications every year (Britton *et al.*, 2016), it is difficult to determine how these figures translate from a number of applications to serving SCs, thus presenting a further challenge of accessing participants for the purpose of the research. Furthermore, information on incomplete or unsuccessful SC applications is data that would sit within the Human Resources (HR) department of each force, making the accessing of participants via this pathway not viable due to the Data Protection Act 2018 and associated regulations.

Therefore, the use of social networking platforms (most notably Twitter – now X) gave access on a national level, albeit to a limited participant pool and hard-to-reach audience (Schnitzler *et al.*, 2016). Twitter proved to be particularly useful as a participant recruitment tool, as it allowed for the following of 157 accounts linked to individuals, institutions, and organisations with a Special Constabulary/police volunteer link – considerably widening the potential response pool.

The application and assessment process for SCs includes several phases designed to ensure that the most suitable and capable people gain employment, aiding to the delivery and robustness of the force and communities they will go on to serve. As such, the current College of Policing's (2022) guidance for joining as a SC states the following stages: i) application form reviewed by the force being applied to, ii) national sift consisting of a situational judgement test and behavioural style questionnaire, iii) in-force interview where candidates are asked a series of questions based on the Competency Values Framework (CVF). Additionally, candidates will have to pass the 15-metre bleep test to level 5.4, undertake the medical assessment and biometric tests and be vetted by the organisation.

For the purposes of this research, the options given to the participants included the application form, Values-Based Questionnaire (VBQ), assessment centre, interview, fitness tests, vetting and a 'other' box to comment in. It was felt that these options were a 'best fit' for this research, as there were

inconsistencies and fluctuations force to force regarding the process, plus some historic Covid implications impacting the recruitment phases.

Few other organisations have such a lengthy recruitment process with as many assessment stages – comparable are the Probation Service who have an application form, behaviour-based assessment, followed by an online assessment centre consisting of a role play, written exercise, and interview (HM Prisons & Probation Service, 2024). Similarly, the Prison Service process includes an application sift, online tests (behavioural and numerical), plus a three-pronged online assessment centre and pre-employment checks. The difference between the two is that the Prison and Probation Service aim to inform applicants of outcomes of assessments and tests within a couple of days – a practice that the police should look to implement where practicable.

Inductive thematic analysis (Braun and Clarke 2019) was applied to gathered data and highlighted three broad themes; 1) some applicants had limited to no knowledge of the SC role; 2) benefits that could be derived from supportive measures; 3) participants wanted better communication and more regular progress updates on the status of their applications.

Findings

Limited to no knowledge of the Special Constable role

Participants were asked to comment upon what they knew about the role of a SC prior to applying to this position - this was to gauge their understanding of the expectations and job requirements that could be placed upon them by their recruiting police force. As a frontline police officer and with full policing powers, the duties, and responsibilities of SCs are mostly indistinguishable from their regular counterparts and over the past two-decades has seen a shift to a predominantly front-line, operational policing model (Bullock and Leeney, 2016), hence the expectation that SCs would understand the role they were applying for.

There was a clear difference in the understanding shown of role expectations from participants, with responses ranging from the comprehensive:

'Volunteer supporting the Regular Force with the full powers of a Police Officer. Requirement to provide a minimum return of 16 hours of service per month. Undertaking all the duties of a Regular Police Officer indistinguishable from any other.'(R16)

To accurate, but less informative comments such as:

'It's the same as being a regular officer but you just don't get paid for it.'(R23)

'volunteer police officer working alongside regular officers.'(R8)

In total, 68.3% of respondents were able to show an understanding of the role of a SC, leaving 31.7% of respondents with limited to no knowledge of the role. It became clear that a prior understanding of the responsibilities and duties, vastly differed between respondents, with some of the less informed highlighting the fact that they knew little about the role as evidenced below:

'Nothing'(R2)

'not a(n) lot of information'(R19)

'Until weeks prior to applying I had no idea the special constabulary existed'(R4)

More in-depth responses to the same question, offered additional viewpoints that underpinned the notion that SC applicants were not as informed of the role they were applying for, suggesting at a lack of research on their part or the potential assumption that recruiting forces, may not clearly and overtly express the demands, expectations, and practicalities of the Special Constable role. Of note, the following responses stood out as evidence of a potential lack of understanding of the practicalities of working as a SC and how embedded they could be within operational policing and the opportunity of working in specialist roles and with specialist teams (Britton *et al.*, 2018, 2019):

'I didnt realise it was as hands on as it is and that I could serve as a response officer. Assumed it would be all the village fetes etc.'(R37)

'... I thought the [role] of the Special Constable was more about community policing. Things like supporting with patrols, community events et cetera. At the time, I wasnt aware how integrated the role of Special Constable was within regular policing.'(R15)

Here R37 states that they were unaware of the 'hands on' nature of the role and the ability to work as a response officer in frontline, operational policing, suggesting that their understanding of the roles and responsibilities of a Special Constable, were lacking. Again, the assumption that SCs only work at events such as village fetes and fairs (R35), suggests that the level of preparedness and expectation of their role, may be disproportionate and could prove to be a significant detour from what they were expecting to experience. The very real chances that a newly appointed Special Constable may be involved in the response to a serious knife incident on joining their force, should assert the need to for both an openness about the role, plus a requirement for new officers to show acknowledgement and recognition of the broad range of potential scenarios that may form part of their voluntary work.

'It can never hurt for applicants to be given real world examples/ experiences of policing. The more realistic the better prepared they'll be for entering the role on the front line.'(R23)

'We need to hold public events and change the notion and stereotypes of the SC. I work in roads policing and will be on the taser course soon. The old adage of football, NTE and fairs etc is out of date...'(R35)

Within the questionnaire, respondents were never asked to state which of the forty-three forces they applied to, though through reviewing SC information pages on a range of police websites, the amount of detail given on the expectations of the role fluctuates significantly from force to force, thus creating a potential disparity in understanding. Of note was the response from R53 (below) who knew that a Special Constable shared the same powers as a regular officer, but failed to recognise that they too, held the power of arrest, which again suggests that they would have benefited from additional information of the role they were applying for.

'I knew that a SC had the same powers as a normal constable except from arresting someone.'(R53)

Underpinned by Gaston and Alexander (2001: p.65), "It is important therefore, from a police recruitment and management perspective, that applicants to the Special Constabulary have the appropriate motivations and realistic expectations of what the role involves.", placing the onus on recruiters and managers to ensure that all SC candidates have a clear and realistic understanding of the implications of their voluntary career. Better candidate information surrounding role expectations, combined with well-considered and easy to access support mechanisms will go some way towards ensuring that applicants will be able to fully engage with the process and a clear idea of what being a Special Constable will mean.

Benefits of support

Respondents were asked to select and comment upon the type of support they would have liked to have received whilst undertaking the application and assessment process to become a Special Constable, ranking as follows. Support from serving Special Constables (28.83%), local force input (22.52%), workshop sessions (21.62%), online sessions (18.92%) and other support (8.1%). These results reinforce the perceived benefits that can be derived from additional support with the recruitment process, with most respondents, recognising that some form of help would be beneficial.

At 28.83%, respondents placed guidance from serving SCs as the most desirable support, showing real perceived value to be gained from engaging and learning from people currently within the role, echoing the work of Stubbs *et al.*, (2023). Their insight clearly demonstrated that there was much to be gleaned from serving Special Constables both on a practical level in terms of what the role entails and the benefits of peer support structures and SC representation, as early as the application stage.

‘more knowledge and insight from serving special constables’(R6)

‘More access to serving SCs to help’(R9)

‘Peer support from serving specials to come in at the early stages or have some sort of reps from serving specials to allow applicants or trainee specials to ask questions or air concerns’(R50)

‘I personally think that some people join the SC not knowing what to expect ie working nights/long hours, getting assaulted. If forces (and I know mine now does) hold sessions with current serving SCs to explain to people what the role actually entails then I think more people will have a better understanding of what to expect when out on shift and ultimately know if its for them before entering the application stage’(R41)

Interestingly, throughout all responses, there were very few who sought support from regular officers, showing a clear divide between the voluntary and paid sectors. This may be in part due to the fact that the questionnaire was clearly aimed at SCs, though responses such as those from R15 below, highlight a fraught relationship between regular officers and Special Constables (Alexander, 2000; Mirrlees-Black and Byron, 1994), again alluding to a potential barrier for success, especially if this feeling is experienced in the very early stages of the recruitment process. Millie (2019) talks to the point that volunteer roles such as the SC are supportive in nature, but also seen as subordinate to paid civilian staff and regular officers, recognising that they ought to be held in higher regard not just for the skillset they bring but the link they can forge between communities and the police (Pepper and Wolf, 2015; Newburn, 2008).

‘From personal experience, I have found working with regular officers to be brilliant most of the time, however, I am aware that some openly have contempt for special constables and refuse to work with them.’(R15)

Whilst most applicants stated they would have benefited from support, a small number of respondents were confident in passing each of the stages along with R16 commenting on the fact that they needed no support, stating:

‘In my case, service of a similar nature meant that I required little or no assistance. But I regard myself as an exception rather than the norm.’(R16)

The ability to draw upon previous experience from a role of a comparable nature meant that certain applicants felt they were skilled and prepared enough to tackle the assessment processes themselves, recognising that they were the exception to the rule, however.

In some instances, the 'other' responses stated that they were confident of the whole process and required no additional support, whilst others felt that the training (Whittle, 2014) should have been more in depth or offered preparation with tackling elements such as the 15-metre multi-stage fitness test (bleep test).

'Bleep test prep! I suffer with bleep anxiety and need to practice it in the live scenario.'(R37)

'i feel as if the training should be more in depth as some areas i still feel unsure on'(R36)

Respondents clearly identified the requirement for some form of additional support, with most stating that they would use more than one service, such as online sessions and local force input, to develop their knowledge and make them better prepared for the challenges of the various recruitment stages. R17 recorded that they would have appreciated information about the whole of the application process so they would better know what would be involved at each stage.

'Some information about the whole application process and what kind of thing would be involved'(R17)

As outlined by R22, they felt a lack of real-world examples to apply to the values-based questionnaire section impacted their chances of success, making them feel underprepared and worried about tackling this element. This response presents an opportunity for recruiting forces to develop accessible material (whether online, in-person or downloadable), that gives prompts to applicants about how they may draw out examples from their personal, professional and academic life and how they can be applied to the assessments. In many instances, candidates will have a wide range of examples to use, but it is the eking out of the examples and knowing how to apply them, that individuals may struggle with.

'I felt underprepared for the values-based questionnaire as I did not have enough real-life examples to use to answer the questions provided.'(R22)

The experience of R18 was different from most in the sense that they were happy that there was support available to them from training and recruiting staff, they just chose not to access it.

'I feel support was on offer from trainers and recruitment staff and although i felt like i didn't need it, i knew it was there.'(R18)

Taken together, these results offer an opportunity for recruiting forces to develop an area of best practice by working with serving SCs to make use of their personal experiences to produce a range of easily accessible material to be used by all candidates. Personal examples, from serving SCs, applied to the assessment stages, will prove to be invaluable to candidates and help where needed.

Communication and progress updates

Respondents identified several key areas of improvement to the application and assessment process that would have made their experiences more positive, with the overarching consensus being that better communication from recruiting teams, greater SC input and a shorter completion time were the most important. Whilst it was evident that many respondents felt the recruitment process took

too long, R13's experience of the process taking 3 years from application to beginning training, pushed the boundaries of the amount of time a volunteer would and should commit to the process.

'Make the process shorter! It took 3 years from application to start training'(R13)

'Make it shorter. It was 15 months before I started training. I joined St Andrews first aiders instead during the wait to help with tbd [the] Covid vaccine and enjoyed it and so nearly gave up the police application.'(R3)

The experience of R3, although not as lengthy as R13, was a commitment of 15 months before training was started – during this time they were able to take up a first aid position with a different organisation and enjoyed their experience, potentially impacting their decision to continue with the process to become a SC. They further commented on the joining process as being a 'real test of commitment' and the fact that the candidate must be motivated (Bullock and Leeney, 2016) to become a SC which was both bound by time and financial outlay on their part.

'The joining process is a real test of commitment. You have to really really want to join despite the process and all its expense (travelling to assessments and occupational health) and the time it takes for vetting and [and] waiting for a [space] in a course. I waited so long my fitness test ran out and I had to do another!'(R3)

Whilst applicants stated that the process needed to be expedited, they also had an expectation to have more frequent feedback on their progression to date, often having to wait many months and they themselves having to actively seek feedback from their local force on the status of their application. This is significantly longer than applicants applying to become prison officers who can expect to receive their online assessment results within 3 days (HM Prisons & Probation Service, 2024). Again, this shows a clear limitation with the process on the part of the recruiting force and that impact it has on its candidates – a lack of updates, keeping candidates waiting, a slow turnaround speed between each phase and the feeling that the process is disjointed, could ultimately deter someone, causing them to reconsider whether to proceed as planned.

'At some points in the process I was waiting for months at a time with no feedback so maybe just some feedback as to what stage I am at and any progress being made.'(R11)

'better communication fro[m] the recruitment team. i had to keep prompting for updates as it was a very slow disjointed process'(R14)

'better communication when certain stages such as vetting has been completed'(R18)

'... 1: A faster turnaround. 2: Keep people informed rather than abandon them for 6 months at a time...4: Allow SCs to become more involved in recruitment, they are closer to the intersection of work, family and being a Special than a random recruitment volunteer...'(R49)

The success of the SC function within any police force relies on the goodwill and commitment of the voluntary sector (Haski-Leventhal and Bargal, 2008) and challenges faced by the initial processes to even join, offer a considerable barrier to be overcome. Policing organisations risk losing committed individuals due to slow processing of applications, poor communication, lack of information and inability to contact people in a supportive capacity when needed – all of which are relatively simple to improve upon and would show a commitment to candidates that they matter to the organisation.

'Prompt and effective timelines, from both sides, applicant and organisation. Help available, both online (with examples if necessary for each stage) and prompt direct phone access if required.'(R16)

'Pick your force. Research them, see what they allow their SCs to do. Try and get hold of serving SCs who aren't Supervision for a proper picture.'(R49)

A common view from respondents as detailed by R15 and R30 below alludes to the fact that the recruitment team and trainers themselves, are not serving or former SCs, so the ability to field questions posed by applicants was lacking. This further embeds the necessity for forces to bring SCs into the application and assessment process as the subject matter experts who can be there to support, reinforce and essentially improve the overall recruitment process.

'The recruitment team responsible for sourcing new special constables dont appear to be aware of what the role entails other than a high-level overview. I would recommend the community in policing team and serving special constables to be more involved in the recruitment process along with regular office[r]s.'(R15)

'We have had a lot of questions for what it is like as a special Constable but trainers arent sure how to answer it because they have never been one so having someone with that experience wouldve been good to see'(R30)

By working in close partnership with SCs, recruiting teams can offer a product and experience that best suits the needs and requirements of its applicants, allowing for simple measures, driven by relevant feedback, as the step toward a better recruitment process.

Recommendations

The findings of this study outline several practical implementations and key areas of improvements that could be made to the Special Constable application and assessment process to better support potential applicants through all stages and to develop their understanding of what the job entails.

Firstly, more information and greater parity of information needs to be made available to Special Constable applicants regarding the role and responsibilities of a Special Constable volunteer. A simple internet search of the role or application and assessment process of an SC brings up differing results – for example, some forces will include videos of the role from the perspective and experience of a serving Special Constable, whilst some may offer a relatively brief overview of job expectations. Others will give a good account of the stages of the assessment process, whilst others offer simple one-liners about one complete phase (such as the online test) of the recruiting procedures.

Evidence of good practice was seen from forces who embed College of Policing guidance on elements such as how to comprehensively complete the application form, giving potential Special Constables a strong chance of meeting the initial criteria to join. Furthermore, some forces offer more factual links to recruitment guidance documentation and how to train and prepare for the bleep test - what is lacking is the 'how to prepare' for all the other assessment phases, which would arguably be as beneficial as the training for the fitness requirements. Consequently, the discrepancies and lack of consistency between the forces and available, usable, and supportive content encompassing each of the stages of the process, are hindering the success chances of applicants.

A key policing priority, whether seen nationally via the College of Policing, or on a more localised force level, is for a minimum set of standards tied directly into the recruitment process that offers all potential Special Constable candidates the best chance to tackle the various stages of assessment. Alongside existing literature, priority suggestions would include instructional videos (for every assessment stage), Special Constable testimony, a portfolio of successful examples (for every assessment stage) as evidenced by R22 below:

'More examples of strong responses during the assessment stages.'(R22)

Candidates would also benefit from guidance on how to draw upon personal experience for the purpose of passing the assessment – this would be beneficial for all applicants, although arguably even more prevalent for participants with a lack of significant life/work experience. It is fair to state, that some forces do much of this well, it is simply the inconsistencies between them all, that makes this research even more valid and relevant.

The discrepancies between forces clearly offer different applicants a dissimilar experience based upon which force they are applying to and to the amount of information that is overtly shared about the practical expectations of a SC. Additionally, the results suggest that recruiting forces should not expect that every applicant is knowledgeable about the role. While a good deal of onus should be placed on the applicant themselves to investigate SC work, forces should also develop material to better emphasise the requirements and expectations. Forces such as West Midlands Police (2024) and West Yorkshire Police (2024), have clearly spent time producing videos featuring Special Constables, offering candidates a good overview of what to expect, although content could be seen as largely positive, potentially not fully highlighting the negative elements of the role. Participants have clearly stated that more openness about the role and greater transparency would be welcomed, so policing organisations should act on this information accordingly.

Next, another important practical implementation should be the focus on the support mechanisms available to applicants, requiring engagement with serving SC's, online sources, greater number of developmental workshops and more input from local forces. This is a reasonable approach to tackle this issue and could easily be embedded within each phase of the recruitment process. Whilst there is a time/cost element to producing new instructional and informative material, the benefits that can be derived from the work would not only better support the experiences of current applicants, but would likely drive-up future recruitment, bringing new volunteers to the table.

The overarching driver for change here, is the close involvement and working relationships with Special Constables as they are the resource most regularly requested from respondents. Ideally, Special Constables will volunteer for the role (Belur *et al.*, 2019) or be selected for their ability and potential (Hendricks, 2014), recognising that their lived experiences, have the scope to inspire and support. By placing and engaging suitable SCs within the recruitment process, a huge number of frustrations and challenges could be quashed, ensuring the process is smoother for all.

An overlooked priority should be for forces to recognise the value of their volunteer workforce (Millie, 2018; Callendar *et al.*, 2022, National Police Chief's Council, 2018) and the external expertise that they bring with them. Whilst they may be new to the police, they may have vast experience in a whole host of other roles and industries (such as marketing and recruitment) which will have clear value and positive impact to the police and recruiters should seek to extract these skillsets from as early as the application stage.

Finally, there is the clear need for significant improvements to be made to the broader application and assessment process for SCs and to more frequent progress updates and better communication from forces as evidenced throughout the collected data. Respondents identified several key areas for development that would enhance their experience of being recruited into a police force, citing additional training opportunities (Whittle, 2014), more transparency around the role, a personalised touch and dedicated phone number to help with queries and concerns. They felt that by taking these extra steps, organisations would significantly raise confidence with candidates, keep them motivated and lead to a greater number of SCs passing all elements of the assessment. Additionally, these

measures would be quick and relatively inexpensive to implement, making them sensible solutions that should not be overlooked.

Whilst some recommendations are not practicable, for example the prohibitive costs of the vetting of applicants at the start of the recruitment process, other ideas offer simple solutions that would show significant benefits to the applicants themselves and to the organisation. Recruiting organisations have the chance to implement several 'quick wins' and to significantly improve candidate experience. The simple example of a SC specific inbox that applicants can use to for progress updates, queries and concerns, which is staffed by Special Constable volunteers, would pay dividends in the future.

In closing, the earlier comments of *R15* solidify the need for improvements to be made to the entire process and to the importance of actively engaging with SCs and recruitment teams to ensure that applicants are as well informed of all aspects of the recruitment process. This extends from application form through to the commencement of training, with Special Constable input embedded throughout. The proposal (where applicable and not impacting the Human Resources function of the organisation) is simple: Special Constable volunteers should run the recruitment process for Special Constables – their knowledge, understanding, experiences and overcome challenges, puts them best placed to support new applicants coming through.

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