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A national evaluation of Community Support Officers

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The main findings from an evaluation of Community Support Officers are reported here. The role of Community Support Officers (CSOs) was described by the Association of Chief Police Officers as contributing 'to the policing of neighbourhoods, 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.' (ACPO, 2005).

The study was carried out by the Home Office between July 2004 and June 2005. Its key aims were to provide a national profile of CSOs and their deployment and to provide indications of their impact on levels of crime and antisocial behaviour and to explore public perceptions of the role. It was expected that CSOs would have a key role to play in the implementation of neighbourhood policing.

Key points

- CSOs spent most of their time in the community through visible patrol and engaging with the community. Much of this time was spent dealing with youth disorder and alcohol related issues.
- CSOs were seen as more accessible than police officers by some members of the public who were, therefore, more likely to report issues to them that they would not 'trouble' a police officer with. The public was also more likely to pass on information to CSOs.
- CSOs' activities varied in different locations which reflected force level and more local priorities.
- The evaluation found no evidence that CSOs were having a measurable impact on the level of recorded crime or reported incidents of antisocial behaviour in the areas where they were deployed. This may be accounted for by a number of factors including limitations of the data, changes in levels of reporting and the sorts of activities targeted by CSOs.
- The public valued the role of CSOs. There was strong evidence from two case study areas, where the CSOs were well known by name to the community, that the residents and businesses felt that CSOs had made a real impact in their areas especially in dealing with youth disorder.
- The diversity of CSOs, particularly in terms of ethnicity and age, has been one of the successes of the implementation of this new role.
- Over 40% of CSOs said they joined as a stepping stone to becoming a fully sworn police officer.

The introduction of CSOs in the Police Reform Act 2002 represented a fundamental change in policing. The Act extended the role of police staff (police staff are personnel employed by a police organisation who do not have the sworn status of a constable) to

assist sworn police officers and fill many front line roles. At the time of the fieldwork early in 2005, forces were able to designate any number of powers from those listed in various Acts of Parliament.

Method

The research aimed to build up a picture of how CSOs were used in forces, their impact on levels of crime and antisocial behaviour, the perceptions of the public and how the initiative was implemented locally. The evaluation drew on a number of data sources at both national and local levels applying both qualitative and quantitative techniques.

National level

- A survey of forces and a survey of CSOs.

Local level

- Three forces (Merseyside, Northumbria and Sussex) were selected as case studies. Within each force, four locations were chosen for detailed study – two experimental areas where CSOs had been deployed for some time and two control areas where CSOs were not currently deployed.
- Within the case study areas, interviews and focus groups were conducted with CSOs, force members, local residents and businesses.
- Local crime, incident and activity data were analysed.

Role, powers and deployment of CSOs

The role of CSOs

The government has made a commitment to deliver neighbourhood policing to all communities. The aim is to 'make communities feel safe and secure by reducing crime and antisocial behaviour in their area' (Home Office, 2005), through the work of visible and accessible neighbourhood policing teams that are responsive to local priorities. This evaluation has shown that CSOs were carrying out activities that were crucial to both the concept behind neighbourhood policing and its effective implementation. They have provided visible and accessible policing and engaged with the public in the areas to which they have been deployed.

CSOs were able to spend more time on patrol than neighbourhood police constables who had other demands on their time – particularly, responding to incidents. Table 1 shows that in each of the case study forces, over half of CSOs' time (between 50% and 57%) was spent in the neighbourhood on visible patrol and community involvement compared with neighbourhood constables of between 16% and 30%.

The evidence from this evaluation showed that CSOs spent much of their time dealing with antisocial behaviour and with youths. Many CSOs were skilled in engaging with the

community, they attended meetings, such as residents' associations and visited schools. The local community appreciated their contacts with young people and were often more prepared to approach CSOs than police officers. They were seen as more accessible and their presence on the streets made people feel they had time to listen and were not too busy to handle more trivial problems. Police officers in particular valued their role in gathering information from the community (see Box 1).

Box 1 Comments about CSOs from interviews with police officers in the case study forces

Their offender intelligence is brilliant – they often know more than the cops – have intimate knowledge of whereabouts of offenders – what they are wearing/ name/where they live – can take months to build up that level of knowledge. (Police officer)

They do encourage people to report where they wouldn't do normally. We get intelligence that we wouldn't otherwise get. CSOs are phenomenally good at providing local intelligence. (Police officer)

The police officers get sent to a rape or an attempted rape, then the CSOs can hear the description ... these two people come out and think oh they look very much like ..., picked them up. So we know, they're eyes and ears for us. (Implementation team)

The beauty of CSOs is that they can talk to the community... the people will tell CSOs things they won't tell cops... On a daily basis they are talking to the community and can provide the cops with a lot of intelligence. (Police commander)

There was local variation (between and within forces) in CSOs' activities that reflected force level and more local priorities. For example, CSOs collected evidence for Antisocial Behaviour Orders, responded to low level incidents and were deployed according to the National Intelligence Model. However, there needs to be a balance between CSOs providing reassurance in the area by patrolling the same beat and CSOs responding to other demands of the service. Some forces had responded to the challenge of CSOs being used for a wide range of tasks by developing specialist roles. For example, deployment CSOs who respond to incidents allow locally based CSOs to provide a dedicated service to the local neighbourhood.

Table 1 Percentage of total time spent on patrol and community involvement, CSOs and neighbourhood police constables (PCs) in three case study forces

% all time	Merseyside		Northumbria		Sussex	
	CSOs Force	PCs Average case study areas	CSOs Force	PCs Force	CSOs Force	PCs Force
Incident linked activities	3.4	27.7	10.4	35.1	13.9	54.4
Patrol and community involvement	50.4	16.4	56.6	29.8	50.4	16.4
Total hours	3,488.7	586.4	2,999.7	17,635.0	9,531.2	2,151.7

Note: Source: Activity analysis October 2004 (local forces).

Powers of CSOs

At the time of the fieldwork, forces had designated different powers to their CSOs. This area was developing during the evaluation and is still under review with Home Office consultation on the introduction of a standard set of powers. The number of powers ranged from none to over 40. Ninety per cent of forces had designated powers relating to:

- lower level antisocial behaviour, including the confiscation of alcohol and tobacco from those underage
- the powers to demand the name and address of a person acting in an antisocial way.

This accorded with the views of many respondents in the forces who felt that CSOs needed sufficient powers to tackle the routine tasks they encountered most frequently. For example, CSOs should be able to deal with low level antisocial behaviour without having to call on police officers.

Deployment of CSOs

There were variations in the ways CSOs patrolled and the shift systems in operation in the forces. There was evidence in some forces that the hours worked by CSOs did not allow for maximum visibility or alignment with neighbourhood policing colleagues. The evaluation found evidence that, regardless of how well targeted their deployment was, many CSOs felt they occasionally encountered situations where they were vulnerable. A large minority had experienced some level of physical abuse and most had experienced verbal abuse.

The impact of CSOs

The evaluation examined the impact of the work of CSOs on the numbers of recorded crimes and reported incidents in the neighbourhoods to which they were deployed, compared with control areas. No discernable differences were found in the trends in the numbers of crime and incidents between areas with and without CSOs, before and after their introduction. This may be because the level of reporting was influenced by:

- how easy it was to report low level incidents
- the limitations of data – particularly because many of the incidents dealt with by CSOs were not categorised as crimes.

The evaluation also considered the impact of CSOs on the public's perceptions of the value of CSOs in tackling antisocial behaviour and providing reassurance. The evidence from the case study areas showed that CSOs spent much of their time dealing with 'youth nuisance' – the main issue for the public in all the areas. The time that CSOs spent in getting to know the community and talking to young people was appreciated by local residents, businesses and police officers. There was strong evidence from two case study areas, where the CSOs were well known by name to the community, that the residents and businesses felt that CSOs had made a real impact in their areas especially in dealing with youth disorder (see Box 2). The ability of CSOs to make residents feel safer was confirmed in areas where they had been deployed for longer periods of time. However, in some areas little publicity about their role had reached residents although businesses appeared to be better informed. This

Box 2 Comments about CSOs from local residents and businesses

They (CSOs) have worked. When we see ... walking around the village, we talk to her. People are ready to talk to her and she's got it all up here, collating all the info she's been given. (A resident)

Generally I think the police, you know the (CSOs), have made a massive difference ... they really have. (Business)

led to confusion among the public, particularly in areas without CSOs, of their status and remit. Many members of the public, whilst appreciating the role of CSOs would have preferred to have had fully sworn police officers.

Profile and job satisfaction of CSOs

Profile of CSOs

From the outset, the CSO role was seen as an opportunity to increase the diversity of policing staff within forces and CSO recruitment was successful in attracting a wide range of people from a variety of backgrounds. They tended to be older and more diverse in terms of ethnicity than police recruits and their past work experience was more wide ranging. Figures from the annual police data return (ADR 2004/05) showed that higher proportions of CSOs (15%) were from a minority ethnic background than were other police staff (6%), police officers (4%) or new recruits (6%). A higher proportion of CSOs was female (41%) than police officers (21%) or police recruits (35%), but this was lower than for other police staff (62%). The comparatively high numbers of CSOs from minority ethnic groups may help to increase the representation of some groups within the police service.

CSOs' job satisfaction

Generally, CSOs were satisfied with their job, although there was some dissatisfaction with the repetitive nature of the work. Those most satisfied were generally older and female and they were most likely to say that they intended to stay in post. Many CSOs expressed concerns about career progression within the role. Over 40% of CSOs, many younger and male, said they had joined as a stepping stone to becoming a sworn police officer. This relatively high number raises issues for the stability, diversity and morale of the workforce. Whilst this is positive for the service as a whole, particularly if the demographics of CSOs feed through to sworn officers, the downside could be the loss of a familiar and consistent presence on the streets.

Training, induction and supervision of CSOs

The comparatively large number of CSOs recruited in a relatively short time led to some problems and concerns in the forces, particularly with regard to training, induction and supervision. Many of the initial pressures on the forces due to the tight timescales for the implementation of CSOs have been addressed by the forces themselves. There were some variations in pay and conditions of service between forces that resulted from CSOs being employed by police authorities on local terms and conditions. The use of shift allowances also varied. In some locations they had been used to enhance pay which increased the attractiveness of the job but reduced the flexibility of deployment.

Training

The evaluation found that there had not been enough time to build a national training model before the introduction of CSOs. At the time of the study, each force had developed its own programme of training, which meant that the length and content of training varied, although there was considerable overlap in content across forces. Central support has now been developed for CSO training in the form of a Centrex-produced (National Centre for Policing Excellence) training manual available to all forces.

Many CSOs expressed concerns about training. In particular, they wanted more practically based teaching methods and additional or refresher training on some of the practical skills especially self-defence. There were different approaches between areas in how they introduced new recruits to the neighbourhood and the team. Some areas had wide ranging induction training and mentoring programmes that were appreciated by the CSOs.

Supervision and management of CSOs

In most cases the supervision of CSOs was by sergeants who retained their existing management workloads – many CSOs felt that their supervisors did not have enough time to support them. Training for those who manage CSOs did not appear to be provided routinely and some supervisors did not fully understand the CSO role.

CSOs were working in a range of organisational structures and many were relatively isolated from the community policing teams. They were often on different shift systems to their policing colleagues and, in particular, their supervisors. These aspects raised issues of co-ordination and effective use. The evidence suggests that CSOs should be managed within neighbourhood policing teams. This would provide:

- day-to-day support and supervision
- the opportunity for CSOs to be more fully involved with neighbourhood policing.

Where this was in place, CSOs felt greater job satisfaction from the increased variability of the work, integration with colleagues and their effectiveness at problem solving.

CSOs generally felt accepted by their police colleagues and where there was resistance to CSOs it tended to come from police officers who did not work closely with them. Partly, this may have been due to inadequate communication within forces, before the arrival of CSOs, which did not prevent officers from feeling threatened about their jobs. However, acceptance of CSOs tended to improve with increased

contact and understanding of the value of the work of CSOs. As a police inspector commented:

I think the police officers in general were sceptical but the police officers that have worked in the neighbourhoods with CSOs have seen their value and the working relationship has built up.

Conclusions

Evidence from this evaluation suggests that CSOs have the potential to be, and have been, successful in many neighbourhoods. However, some aspects of deployment and staffing need consideration if their role is to be fully effective in the local area. These include:

- staff turnover, particularly the number of CSOs wanting to become fully sworn officers, and the impact on service provision within the neighbourhood
- the implications of CSOs carrying out tasks that fall outside their main role of patrol and community engagement
- how to balance the advantages of close team-working with police colleagues and the importance that times of deployment allow for maximum visibility
- how to ensure adequate supervision for CSOs without overburdening sergeants
- how to deliver training and induction that meets the needs of CSOs.

The evaluation found two key factors to the successful and effective use of CSOs:

- the embedding of CSOs within the forces' organisational structures
- ensuring that police officers and members of the public fully understood the unique role of CSOs.

There was evidence from the evaluation that police officers and members of the public who had had contact with CSOs had a much greater understanding of their role than those who had had little contact.

The evaluation identified elements of good practice for CSOs working in a neighbourhood. These included having a clearly defined role with appropriate powers and deployment, working in a fixed location, being deployed within the local area through the National Intelligence Model and being accessible to the public.

References

Association of Chief Police Officers (2005). *Guidance on Police Community Support Workers. Revised June 2005*. London: ACPO.

Home Office (2005). *Neighbourhood Policing: Your Police; Your Community; Our Commitment*. London: Home Office.

For a more detailed report of the evaluation see *A national evaluation of Community Support Officers* by C, Cooper, J, Anscombe, J, Avenell, F, McLean and J, Morris (2006). Home Office Research Study No. 297. London: Home Office. Copies are available from the Home Office Direct Communications Unit. It is also available on the Home Office website <http://www.homeoffice.gov.uk/rds/horspubs1.html>

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