



Institute for  
**Public Safety  
Crime and Justice**

# **The Specials “experience” in Northamptonshire: A critical review**

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**Summary report, including key findings and  
recommendations.**

## Summary

There is an extensive recruitment drive at present to increase the number of Special Constables for Northamptonshire Police. It was recognised that there are a significant number of gaps in the understanding of the whole Specials experience and that consequently there was a need for research to explore this.

The existing research is exploring the Specials “experience” in Northamptonshire from individuals considering becoming a Special, through to the recruitment experience (including the relevance and impact of marketing campaigns), appointment, retention, utilisation of skills and even attrition and resignation from the role. It also considers the latest evidence in relation to the process as a whole and its component parts. The research findings can be used to inform future policy and practice in relation to the recruitment, utilisation and retention of Specials.

This report provides a summary of the key findings that are emerging from the research, together with significant recommendations and proposals for future research. High level emergent findings to date include:

- The main motivation for people to join the Specials is career (i.e. as a stepping stone to the regular force), especially young people.
- Advertising plays a very limited role in encouraging individuals to become a Special.
- The pressure to increase the number of Specials in the short-term is not being reflected in the long term retention of Specials, due to the motivations of those who are joining.
- The application process is lengthy, with long periods of no contact between the force and applicant, leading some to withdraw from the process.
- Training is perceived to be of high quality, but of limited value in preparing Specials for active duty.
- On-going training opportunities are limited.
- Supervision and direct management is variable across the force area, as is the extent to which Specials perceive that they are valued.
- The promotion structure is not well known, well understood or well marketed, impacting promotion opportunities.
- Individual skill utilisation is low or non-existent as is the knowledge across the force of Specials educational backgrounds, skills and expertise.

The research has highlighted a significant number of additional research requirements and these will be developed during early 2015.

# 1. Motivation to volunteer

The research found that the key factor that motivates Specials to volunteer is their desire to pursue a career in the police. Other reasons, though less prevalent, are a desire to help the community and gaining knowledge and skills. These findings reinforce evidence from other survey exercises. Marketing and advertising played only a limited role in the decision making process to become a Special Constable.

Those of a younger age are more likely to be motivated by their careers than those of an older age, who are more likely to be motivated by a desire to give something back to the community.

The relatively large proportion of Specials volunteering with the intention to join the regulars may represent a problem for longer-term retention rates and the desire to increase the overall number of Specials. Achievement of target numbers is only one challenge; retaining them is another one.

In addition, those who become a Special with the main motivation to join the regulars may look leave the special constabulary as and when an employment opportunity arises within the regular service. To ensure that the financial investment in these individuals is recouped, the force should identify the minimum number of hours service required to secure a 'return on investment'. Individuals with more altruistic motives, such as those who join in order to help the community, may be more likely to remain in their roles for a longer period of time. Consequently, the force should consider the motivations of individuals during the recruitment phase to ensure that a rapid recruitment phase is not followed by high wastage rates, as Specials either join the regular service or become disillusioned about their prospect of future employment.

Recommendations of note in relation to motivation include:

- Careful thought should be given to the desired future profile of the Special Constabulary, taking into account factors which motivate people to join.
- Recruitment policies need to reflect this profile.

## 2. Recruitment

### Advertising and marketing

In its Specials recruitment marketing campaign, Northamptonshire Police uses a variety of different methods to raise awareness about the volunteer opportunities within the Special Constabulary.

The most commonly cited method through which potential recruits found out about the Special Constabulary was via digital media, including the force website and Facebook. There was limited evidence to suggest that it was more influential for those recruits with less than one year's service.

Other, less prevalent methods for individuals to find out more about becoming a Special were via a friend or colleague and through their school or college.

The leaflet campaign was found to be costly and largely ineffective and the evidence strongly suggests that such scattergun type approaches are of very limited value, achieving little more than raising awareness.

### Competency awareness

For potential applicants, the advantage of attending a competency awareness evening (CAE) seems apparent at the paper sift stage. However, evidence suggests that attending a competency awareness evening offers little in terms of providing applicants with an advantage in relation to final recruitment. On that basis, the resources required in order to run these events may prove difficult to justify. If such events are felt to be useful, there may be value in exploring other delivery mechanisms, such as Skype or online approaches which reflect the importance of online methods in relation to recruitment.

In addition, a significant proportion of those attending CAE sessions failed to follow through with applications.

### Application and assessment

Evidence strongly suggests that the application process is perceived to be fair, but not necessarily efficient.

The applications process is perceived to be too long and too complex, with evidence that it can take between five and seven months, and sometimes up to a year, from application to the commencement of training. This is a key contributory factor to Specials withdrawing from the recruitment process.

Other factors found to be important in explaining why prospective recruits dropped out at the recruitment stage include long periods of no contact with the force and the resultant failure to keep applicants informed of progress, the inflexibility of the process, issues with the multi-force shared service (MFSS) such as lost information, and the lengthy paper sift phase.

Recommendations of note in relation to recruitment include:

- There must be a clear plan regarding the type of Specials to be recruited according to such factors as age, gender, ethnicity, motivation to join, area of domicile, socio-demography.

- The resulting marketing campaign should adopt a variety of methods to ensure that the most appropriate mechanisms are used to achieve maximum traction with the target groups.
- Marketing campaigns should be tailored to the specific roles being recruited for (e.g. Parish Constable, Special Constable).
- There needs to be a re-assessment of the CAE process in terms of such factors as aims, structure, delivery format, content, resourcing and timing. As part of this process, consideration should also be given to the value of the CAE process as a whole and whether the aims of CAE can be delivered more effectively through other mechanisms. This should seek to not only improve the experience for applicants but also make more effective use of police resources.
- The recruitment process needs to be re-evaluated, particularly as new volunteer opportunities within the Special Constabulary come online. In particular, it is important that the recruitment process, in terms of application follow through and subsequent success and use of resource, is as efficient as possible.

## 3. Retention

### Initial training

Whilst perceptions of initial training are broadly favourable in relation to quality and adequacy, there are areas of concern regarding the content and the extent to which it prepares Specials for duty.

There is a sense that there is an over-focus on legislation with insufficient consideration of the real-life situations that Specials often have to deal with and further on-the-job training, particularly around everyday tasks. Such training would better prepare Specials for independence.

There is evidence to suggest that those Specials who are taking the Foundation degree programme are better prepared for duty than those who are not. This perception is shared by both Special Constables and the regular officers they work alongside.

### Skills utilisation

There is strong evidence to suggest that Specials do not feel that their individual skills, knowledge and abilities are effectively utilised by the force and that they are merely assigned to tasks randomly, depending on availability and this is a source of some frustration. A stronger focus on the individual could not only improve individual satisfaction and therefore retention, but also provide better value for money for the force.

There are significant information gaps in relation to educational backgrounds and detailed skill sets of individuals. This information could help Specials to be utilised more effectively. Rather than just being seen as a group, Specials should be seen as valuable individuals who bring a unique collection of personal knowledge, skills and experiences to the force and who should be utilised according to their specific skill sets in order to maximise effective utilisation.

### Benefits

Broadly, the benefits that Specials perceive in fulfilling the role are that they are gaining experience in policing, gaining new skills, improving their confidence, meeting new people, gaining knowledge of law and order and feeling that they are helping the wider community. There is strong evidence that Specials enjoy being a Special and feel that they make a contribution to the force and the community, especially where they are clearly seen to be a valuable and valued resource.

### Recognition and reward

There is some evidence however, that Specials feel less rewarded for their efforts, though the concept of reward in this context is broad. This might be a cause for concern as, if Specials do not feel that what they are doing is adequately rewarded, it may negatively affect retention.

For many, the fact that their work is valued by regular officers and the force as a whole, is reward enough and yet the research suggests that Specials do not as a matter of course, feel valued for the work that they do. More can be done in order to make Specials feel valued for the work they do, which in turn can help improve retention.

This research has highlighted differences in the approaches to making Specials feel valued across the force area. In some areas they are made to feel valued through such activities as supervisors and

regulars often thanking them for their efforts and being included on staff social events. In other areas, supervisors were said to be disinterested in Specials and therefore failed to recognise the efforts of Specials. Clearly, the importance of valuing the work of Specials should be encouraged and promoted across the whole force area.

As noted earlier, many Specials are career driven personal development is the greatest reward.

There appears, at this stage, to be little appetite for financial reward over and above the existing regime in relation to expenses.

### **Progression**

Knowledge of the Specials rank structure appears to be limited. Perceived lack of information and limited marketing of the opportunities for advancement within the Specials structure appears to impact the ability of Specials to seek promotion to higher ranks.

There is also evidence that there is a need for greater clarification regarding the route from Special to regular.

### **Equipment**

The research suggests that Specials feel that they are provided with high equality and adequate equipment to enable them to do their job.

### **On-going training**

The research suggests that there is significant dissatisfaction with the amount and quality of ongoing training provided to Specials. Sources of dissatisfaction include the organisation of training sessions, sessions being changed or cancelled at short notice, subject matter being insufficient to prepare officers for duty, availability to attend. Conversely, the research recognises that training is available and those who take a more proactive approach in seeking it out, often derive most benefit.

It also suggests that the quality and adequacy of training differs depending on where Specials are based, with some supervisors and/or locations being much more actively engaged in the personal development of Specials, than others. The approach to the personal development of Specials must be consistent across the force area.

### **Management and supervision**

The research suggests that effective communication between Specials and management is variable across the force area and that there is significant evidence of poor communication between supervisors and Specials. Good communication and supervision is perceived to be almost the "luck of the draw".

Effective communication and supervision is critical in making Specials feel valued and in turn, impacting retention rates. A strong and consistent approach must be encouraged and promoted across the force area.

There is evidence of a hands-off approach and the need for Specials to be proactive in seeking out support in the context of minimal guidance from supervisors.

Recommendations of note in relation to retention include:

- Revision of the Specials training programme, including a comprehensive training needs assessment, to ensure that it equips Specials with the skills to enable them to carry out their tasks effectively. This should take into account the Foundation degree programme as well as the other forms of training offered within the force.
- The approach to the personal development of and the delivery of ongoing training to Specials must be consistent across the force area.
- Establishment of a database of educational backgrounds of Specials and their specific areas of expertise. This should be referred to with regard to Specials utilisation and resource planning.
- Clearly, the importance of valuing the work of Specials should be encouraged and promoted across the whole force area.
- Ongoing training and development of Specials should be planned, communicated and delivered in a more structured way.
- Effective communication and supervision is critical in making Specials feel valued and, in turn, may have a positive impact upon retention rates. The role of Special Development Officers (SDOs) is critical to this, and a strong and consistent approach supervision should be encouraged and promoted across the force area.



## 4. Resignation

The literature shows that the primary reasons for resignation of Specials are work or study commitments, domestic reasons and moving on to join regulars. This research supports this view, and is perhaps not surprising given the large number of individuals joining the Special Constabulary as means into a policing career. The strong desire of many new recruits to join the regulars has clear implications for retention and the long-term headcount of Specials, not only within Northamptonshire, but also nationally.

Organisational and managerial factors including poor supervision, feeling undervalued, poor training, the role being boring and not perceived to be worthwhile were also important factors identified by the research as influencing resignation and retention. The impact of such factors is significant as they are those which can be most easily influenced by the force.

The research therefore highlights potential concerns regarding long-term commitment of Specials towards the special constabulary, particularly so for those motivated by a career in the regular service. Taking into account the motivational drivers of Specials may help support longer-term commitment to the Special Constabulary improving both retention rates and the longer-term head count number.

Recommendation of note in relation to resignation include:

- Building a clear understanding of the reasons for resignation and utilising the data from this process to improve retention.

## 5. Further research

This review of the Specials experience in Northampton has identified several areas of further research. Areas for future research include:

- Greater understanding of effectiveness of various marketing approaches by market segment i.e. gender, age, ethnicity, socio-economic factors, and geography.
- Understanding the impact of marketing activities in relation to role specific Specials opportunities such as the Parish Constable.
- A greater understanding of the Specials leadership and the supervision, including a better understanding of supervisory processes and supervisory need.
- Developing an understanding of the consistency of Specials management, supervision and support across the force areas, including reasons for variation.
- Analysis of the impact that the different training methods delivered within Northamptonshire has on onwards progression, within not only the Special Constabulary, but also into the regular service.
- Detailed analysis of the Specials structure including exploration of linkages, formal and informal, to the regular force across all levels in the Specials rank structure.
- Review, and re-design of the whole recruitment process to ensure that it is as effective as possible in terms of applicant follow through and subsequent success, and the use of resources.
- A greater understanding of effective Specials performance management programmes and support in the provision and analysis of such data (e.g. Duty Sheet) on an ongoing basis.
- Understanding how Specials can be integrated into the broader demand management programme and the extent to which knowledge and skills are exploited to best effect by the force.
- Investigating the links between paid employment and the Special Constabulary, including the benefits to the volunteer's employer. This could consider issues such as the 'value added' from a security perspective of employing individuals who are also Specials.
- Consideration of the relative benefits and costs of Specials compared to volunteers and other groups in the police "family" such as PCSOs.
- Building a broader Cost Benefit model and analysis in relation to Specials.
- An exploration of the broader issues surrounding volunteerism in supporting police activity, over and above Specials, including roles, impact, value and process issues. This would include a consideration of such groups as Police Support Volunteers (PSV) and police cadets.
- Understanding how increases in number of volunteers within the police workforce affects the ability of the organisation to adapt to and deal with existing and emerging threats/crime types such as online crime.

Discussions with College of Policing representatives have highlighted a lack of research in this area nationally. It is therefore proposed to take a more strategic approach to the development of a comprehensive Specials research programme.

Using this research as a springboard, it is intended to develop five thematic research programmes going forward, which are likely to focus on Motivations, Marketing, Recruitment, Retention and Utilisation (including Performance Assessment). These areas will form the basis of additional research to be carried early in 2015 such that a number of research “products” in relation to this work can be delivered in mid-2015. This phase of the work to develop ‘insight’ and ‘evidence’ will continue the focus on the Northamptonshire Specials programme, but will also broaden out and encompass research in other UK police forces.