

Protective Equipment for Police Community Support Officers – a postcode lottery in safety?



An analysis of Police Forces in England and Wales

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Introduction

Complaints from MPs of all parties is what it currently takes to hold police forces to account using parliamentary questions.

A frequently recycled sentence in Home Office written replies states that the question being pursued is “a matter for Chief Constables” - leaving concerned MPs none the wiser.

This short report is the result of one “decision for Chief Constables” too many, together with safety concerns raised by public services union, UNISON, over the application of health and safety legislation for Police Community Support Officers (PCSOs).

Using the Freedom of Information Act, I have discovered that whilst most forces believe PCSOs should be equipped with protective clothing similar to their front line counterparts, a small number of Chief Constables take a more cavalier approach – this despite reported attacks on PCSOs almost trebling between 2004 and 2006.

Freedom of Information requests to each Police Authority in England and Wales have highlighted an inconsistency in approach that I hope the Home Office will now examine. In particular, the interpretation of the *Health and Safety at Work Act 1974*, *Police Health and Safety Act 1997* and the responsibility of Chief Constables to protect their staff.

The answers I received show that more than 1 in 7 PCSOs pound the streets without any protective clothing...in fact a postcode lottery in PCSO safety that should be dealt with immediately.

I have contacted Home Office Minister Tony McNulty highlighting these inconsistencies and asking him to bring an end to this postcode lottery by ensuring that Health and Safety legislation with regard to PCSOs is applied across all forces in England and Wales.

Key Findings:

1. Four Police Authorities fail to issue Protective Armour to PCSOs: West Midlands, Staffordshire, Surrey and Greater Manchester.
2. More than 1 in 7 PCSOs (13%) do not have access to a stab proof vest
3. Attacks on PCSOs increased between 2004 and 2006, from 96 to 272 recorded incidents.

What are Police Community Support Officers?

Police Community Support Officers (PCSOs) were introduced by former Home Secretary David Blunkett in 2003. They were brought in to tackle low level crime and anti social behaviour, and to provide a high visible presence to reassure the public against fear of crime. PCSOs are also responsible for the delivery of neighbourhood policing strategies.

According to the HomeOffice, Police Community Support Officers:

*'Work alongside police officers. They have fewer powers than police officers and specials. They have the power to issue fixed penalty notices for anti-social behaviour, for example, but not to conduct a stop and search.'*¹

Originally the government planned to recruit 24,000 PCSOs by 2007/2008. However, in a written ministerial statement to the House of Commons, Tony McNulty, Minister for Policing, Security, and Community Safety, stated that following discussions with the police service, the delivery of neighbourhood policing meant that police forces did not need to recruit 24,000 PCSOs.

The Government therefore revised its original target, and is now committed to supporting the recruitment of 16,000 PCSOs by 2007-8.²

Protective Equipment

¹ Home Office Website, <http://www.homeoffice.gov.uk/police/powers/>

² Minister for Policing, Security and Community Safety, Written Ministerial Statement (Local Policing), *Official Report*, Column 83WS, 27 November 2006

The difference in levels of protective equipment issued by police forces have been highlighted several times since the introduction of PCSOs in 2003.

In Manchester PCSO Gary Etchells was stabbed whilst trying to serve an eviction notice. In the West Midlands Unison has received complaints from PCSOs and expressed their concerns to the West Midlands Police Force regarding its refusal to issue stab proof vests.³

Annette Mansell-Green of Unison said: "Without these vests an officer could be killed or seriously injured. Our members are frightened and worried, we think they should be properly protected at work. The officers may have a non-confrontational role, but members of the public don't distinguish them from full-time police officers and they confront PCSOs."

In the light of these concerns, I asked a parliamentary question to Tony McNulty, Minister of State for Policing Security and Community Safety. He answered on 22 January 2007.

Mr McNulty's answer failed to inform me which police authorities issued body armour and stated that the issue of protective equipment for PCSOs is a matter for Chief Constables:

Mr. Watson: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department how many police community support officers are equipped with stab vests in each police authority area; and if he will make a statement. [117344]

Mr. McNulty: It is for chief constables to determine which equipment should be issued to police community support officers. Information about their decisions is not collected centrally.⁴

Freedom of Information

³ Support Officers' Stab Vest Fear, *BBC News Online*, 7 August 2006

http://news.bbc.co.uk/1/hi/england/west_midlands/5253778.stm

⁴ Tom Watson MP, Written Parliamentary Question, 22 January 2007, *Official Report*, Column 1545W

Following this failure to answer by the Home Office, I used the Freedom of Information Act (2000) to put the question to all 43 police authorities in England and Wales.

The Freedom of Information request asked the following of each Chief Constable:

- a) How many police community support officers were employed as of December 2006 in your police force area?
- b) How many of those Police Community Support Officers (employed as of December 2006) were issued with their own stab vest
- c) Any documentation that outlines the policy towards uniform and equipment for police community support officers.

This study concentrates specifically on the issue of stab proof vests for PCSOs. It should be noted that the issue of other safety equipment including handcuffs, sprays and batons is also a matter for each Chief Constable.

The results of the findings follow, and clearly highlight discrepancies in safety policy between police forces in England and Wales.

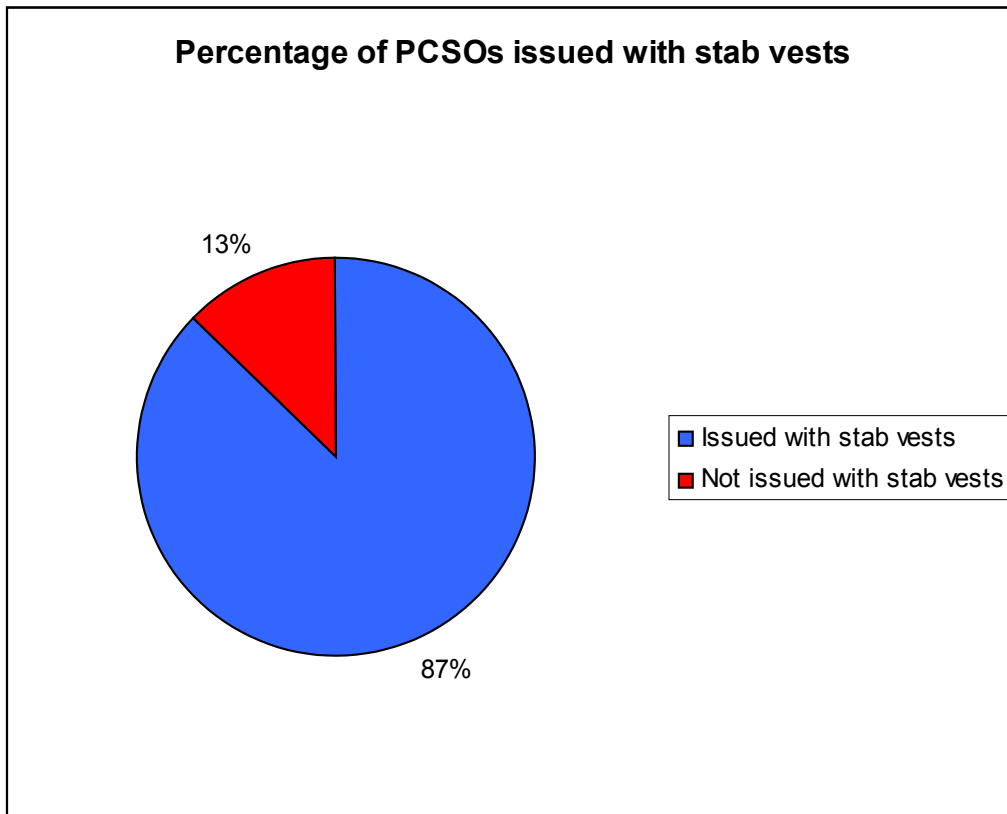
Results

Police Authority	Number of PCSOs (December 2006)	Are PCSOs issued with stab vests?
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Avon and Somerset Constabulary	241	Yes
Bedfordshire Police	88	Yes
Cambridgeshire Constabulary	155.41 (full time equivalent)	Yes
Cheshire Constabulary	161	Yes
City of London Police	21	Yes
Cleveland Police	121	Yes
Cumbria Constabulary	63.69 (full time equivalent)	Yes
Derbyshire Constabulary	102	Yes
Devon and Cornwall Constabulary	228.5 (full time equivalent)	Yes
Dorset Police	101	Yes
Durham Constabulary	120	Yes
Essex Police	382	Yes
Gloucestershire Constabulary	120	Yes
Greater Manchester Police	556	No *
Hampshire Constabulary	201	Yes
Hertfordshire Constabulary	188	Yes
Humberside Police	144	Yes
Kent Police	182	Yes
Lancashire Constabulary	284	Yes
Leicestershire Constabulary	162	Yes
Lincolnshire Police	131	Yes
Merseyside Police	299	Yes
Metropolitan Police	3080	Yes
Norfolk Constabulary	141	Yes
Northamptonshire Police	117	Yes
Northumbria Police	194	Yes
North Yorkshire Police	121	Yes
Nottinghamshire Police	198	Yes
South Yorkshire Police	220	Yes
Staffordshire Police	164	No
Suffolk Constabulary	92	Yes
Surrey Police	192	No
Sussex Police	303	Yes
Thames Valley Police	150	Yes
Warwickshire Police	90	Yes
West Mercia Constabulary	186	Yes
West Midlands Police	498	No
West Yorkshire Police	546	Yes
Wiltshire Police	110	Yes
Dyfed Powys Police	37	Yes
Gwent Police	95	Yes
North Wales Police	107	Yes

South Wales Police	251	Yes
Total number of PCSOs	10943.6	

* At time of answering, Greater Manchester Police were in the process of introducing stab proof vests for their PCSOs.



Analysis

The number of PCSOs without protective clothing is 1,410 - 13% - all whom are employed by four police authority areas: West Midlands Police, Staffordshire Police, Surrey Police and Greater Manchester Police.

From evidence provided by other Chief Constables, it is possible that the decision of the above forces not to issue PCSOs with stab proof vests may contravene the Health and Safety at Work Act 1974. This was highlighted in Suffolk Constabulary's response. Their body armour policy states that:

'The Health and Safety at Work Act 1974, requires the Chief Constable and Police Authority to safeguard the health, safety, and welfare of their employees. This includes the safety of others affected by their undertakings.'

In addition, Suffolk Constabulary included documentation regarding the Police (Health and Safety) Act 1997 which brought the Police Service under the Health and Safety at Work Act. This has resulted in the possibility of criminal proceedings against the Constabulary in the event of any breach of Health and Safety legislation.

This opens up the possibility of West Midlands Police, Staffordshire Police, Surrey Police or their PCSO employers facing legal proceedings in the event of a PCSO being stabbed or seriously injured. Greater Manchester Police could also be open to such proceedings until all of their PCSOs receive stab proof vests. Northamptonshire Police's mixed policy on stab proof vests, explained below, could also render them liable to criminal proceedings.

Importance of Stab Vests

The importance of stab proof vests was emphasised in many of the responses from police forces. Durham Constabulary for example issues the following advice:

*'All uniformed officers, including Special Constables and Police Community Support Officers, engaged in operational duties outside Police buildings which bring them into contact with the general public **MUST WEAR** their body armour at all times.'*

Sussex Police's Staff Safety Awareness Policy states:

'The risk to Sussex Police officers of injury from being either stabbed or shot is low. It is recognised however, that if an officer is assaulted in either of these ways the effects could be life threatening. It is acknowledged that Personal Protective Vests provide protection against other trauma, e.g. in road collisions...the personal Protective Vest is

part of the uniform of officers, PCSOs and Traffic Wardens. It would be worn at all times when engaged in operational duty.'

Sussex Police raise an important point. Stab proof vests can provide protection against other traumas and not just from ballistic weapons. West Midlands Police, Staffordshire Police and Surrey Police seemingly fail to recognise this benefit.

Assaults on PCSOs

In answer to a written parliamentary question on the number of assaults on PCSOs whilst on duty, in each of the last three years, the Home Office provided the following figures during the course of this study:

The available data are given in the following table.

Police community support officers assaulted whilst on duty as at 31 March 2004 to 31 March 2006⁽¹⁾

<i>As of 31 March</i>	<i>Assaults (Headcount)</i>
2004	96
2005	191
2006 ⁽²⁾	272

⁽¹⁾Financial year runs 1 April to 31 March inclusive.

⁽²⁾Excludes Thames Valley. Data not provided.

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While PCSOs are primarily deployed to provide public reassurance rather than engage in confrontational situations, there is no guarantee against this happening. The figures above reinforce this argument.

Northamptonshire Police

Concerns have also been highlighted with regards to Northamptonshire Police and their uniform policy. While all PCSOs are issued with stab vests:

'They will not routinely be worn. The decision to wear a protective/stab vest for PCSOs will ordinarily be at the discretion of an officer's direct supervisor or duty

⁵ Tom Watson MP, Written Parliamentary Question, 20 February 2007, *Official Report*, Column 643W

supervisor and based on a risk assessment. This should be a Sergeant or above. PCSOs may still use their own discretion to choose to wear a protective/stab vest, where an objective accountable assessment of the situation concerned, deems it appropriate.'

Northamptonshire Police's policy therefore differs from that of other forces issuing PCSOs with stab vests and requiring them to be worn at all times outside the Police station. Where the risk of confrontation is very low, for example, a pre-arranged community meeting or when a PCSO is dealing with a sensitive issue such as bereavement, stab proof vests do not have to be worn. However, when body armour is not worn in these circumstances, it must still be readily available.

West Midlands Police

West Midlands Police do not issue PCSOs with stab vests because the emphasis of deployment is based on 'high visibility, communication and reassurance' to the public. PCSOs are not meant to be deployed to incidents better dealt with by police officers or considered 'high risk.' West Midlands Police have emphasised that this policy is regularly reviewed.

The response from West Midlands Police also states that there have been 48 recorded assaults on PCSOs in that police authority area. While none of these incidents have yet involved edged or ballistic weapons, it again emphasises that PCSOs can be at risk. Two of those assaults resulted in loss of time from work for West Midlands PCSOs (one of 18 days). It is fortunate that none of the 48 assaults involved a bladed weapon.

Staffordshire Police

Staffordshire Police do not provide their PCSOs with individual stab proof vests 'in accordance with the risk assessment carried out in relation to their role.' The force have emphasised that their PCSOs play a role of reassurance and provide neighbourhood visibility as opposed to confrontation.

Staffordshire Police recognise that the role of the PCSO:

'cannot be made risk free...but we are satisfied that the training currently provided is comprehensive and safeguards the PCSO in terms of recognising confrontational situations before they develop into a situation beyond their capabilities. Body armour is available in divisional pools for other officers including PCSOs to wear only in the most extreme circumstances.'

The approach taken by Staffordshire Police differs substantially from the 87% of forces who do issue their PCSOs with stab proof vests, clearly recognising that there is an element of risk to PCSOs in the role which they fulfil.

Surrey Police

The protective clothing policy of Surrey Police is similar to that of Staffordshire Police. Surrey Police assert that PCSOs play an integral part within the Neighbourhood Policing Team and have a distinct role that avoids 'high risk activity and conflict situations.' Therefore PCSOs will not routinely be issued with stab proof vests. This strategy is continually reviewed by the force PCSO manager in conjunction with the Force Health and Safety Manager.

Greater Manchester Police

Greater Manchester Police were in the process of issuing stab proof vests before the stabbing of Gary Etchells in December 2006. The move was announced by ACC Territorial Policing, Ian Seabridge, in Greater Manchester Police's newspaper entitled 'Brief.'

Mr Seabridge said that:

'Force Command had decided that, on balance, it would be better for PCSOs to have the protection than not to have it...you never know what you are going to walk into.'

Appendix

Written Parliamentary Questions

22 January 2007, Official Report, column 1545w

Mr. Watson: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department how many police community support officers are equipped with stab vests in each police authority area; and if he will make a statement. [117344]

Mr. McNulty: It is for chief constables to determine which equipment should be issued to police community support officers. Information about their decisions is not collected centrally.

31 January 2007, Official Report, column 365w

Mr. Watson: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department pursuant to his answer of 22 January 2007, *Official Report*, column 1545W, on police community support officers, what evidence he has considered on the effect of the use of stab vests on the safety of employees of the police force. [112589]

Mr. McNulty [*holding answer 30 January 2007*]: The Home Office Scientific Development Branch develop and publish standards for a range of protective equipment for the police and advises police forces and the Government on protective equipment for police use, ensuring that officers have the equipment they need to protect themselves and the public. However the decision on deployment and equipment of PCSOs in each force remains a matter for the chief constable.

31 January 2007, Official Report, column 364w

Mr. Watson: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department for what reason the target for the recruitment of police community support officers has been changed from 24,000 to 16,000. [117341]

Mr. McNulty [*holding answer 22 January 2007*]: I refer my hon. Friend to the written ministerial statement on 27 November 2006, *Official Report*, columns 82-86WS.

31 January 2007, Official Report, column 365w

Mr. Watson: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department (1) what factors were taken into account when deciding not to supply police community support officers with handcuffs; [111859]

(2) what response he has made to the request from Unison to provide police community support officers in the west midlands with stab vests. [117343]

Mr. McNulty [*holding answers 22 and 26 January 2007*]: A chief officer may designate a PCSO with the power to use reasonable force in carrying out the relevant powers designated to that officer under schedule 4 of the Police Reform Act 2002.

The use of handcuffs or other restraint or protective equipment by PCSOs is an operational matter for the chief officer.

16 February 2007, Official Report, column 94w

Mr. Watson: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department pursuant to the answer of 31 January 2007, *Official Report*, column 364W, on police community support officers, what advice the Home Office Scientific Development Branch has given to police forces in England and Wales on the issuing of protective equipment for police community support officers. [121155]

Mr. McNulty: The Home Office Scientific Development Branch regularly advises police forces with regard to Personal Protective Equipment (PPE). However, they have not been asked to provide advice specific to police community support officers. Additionally, any advice is always on the understanding that suitable risk assessments are carried out by the force to determine if PPE is required and the level of protection that the PPE should offer.

20 February 2007, Official Report, column 643w

Mr. Watson: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department how many police community support officers were assaulted whilst on duty in each of the last three years. [117342]

Mr. Coaker [*holding answer 22 January 2007*]: The available data are given in the following table.

<i>Police community support officers assaulted whilst on duty as at 31 March 2004 to 31 March 2006⁽¹⁾</i>	
<i>As of 31 March</i>	<i>Assaults (Headcount)</i>
2004	96
2005	191
2006 ⁽²⁾	272
⁽¹⁾ Financial year runs 1 April to 31 March inclusive.	
⁽²⁾ Excludes Thames Valley. Data not provided.	

19 March 2007, Official Report, column 666w

Mr. Watson: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department pursuant to the answer of 19 February 2007, *Official Report*, column 94W, on community support officers protective clothing, what representations he has received from representatives of police community support officers on the issuing of protective equipment. [123889]

Mr. McNulty [*holding answer 27 February 2007*]: We have received a number of representations about the issue of protective equipment to police community support officers (PCSOs), but none from representatives of PCSOs. The decision on the equipment of PCSOs in each force remains a matter for chief officers.

16 April 2007, Official Report, column 478w

Mr. Watson: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department how many police community support officers were employed as of 31 December 2006, broken down by police authority area. [130049]

Mr. McNulty [*holding answer 26 March 2007*]: The most recently available data are published in the Home Office Statistical Bulletin, Police Strength in England and Wales, 30th September 2006 (04/07), and are given in the following table.

The bulletin is available in the Library of the House and can be downloaded from:

<http://www.homeoffice.gov.uk/rds/pdfs07/hosb0407.pdf>

*For the purposes of this inquiry it was decided to use the December 2006 figures collected from the Freedom of Information Requests because they were more recent than those kept by the Home Office. In July 2006, the Home Office recorded a total of 8517 PCSOs. At the end of December 2006, there were 10943.6 PCSOs in England and Wales (including full time equivalents).

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