

## Analysis of Police Community Support Officer (PCSO) Activity Based Costing (ABC) data: results from an initial review

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### Introduction

This report summarises the activities undertaken by Police Community Support Officers (PCSOs) while on active duty and explores whether these activities are in line with Home Office guidance on the role of PCSOs.

### Background

In 2002, the Association of Chief Police Officers (ACPO) issued guidance outlining a number of issues relating to PCSOs, including their role and purpose. The guidance suggested that the fundamental role of PCSOs is to contribute 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. It also stressed that the emphasis of this role, and the powers required to fulfil it, would probably vary from neighbourhood to neighbourhood and force to force. It also suggested that as the role of PCSOs develops, there is an expectation that it would encompass a wider range of duties, some of which have previously only been carried out by police officers. While ACPO said that it would encourage this development, they also stressed that the role should “remain within the framework of Neighbourhood Policing (NP), with an emphasis on engagement as opposed to enforcement”.<sup>1</sup>

Recruitment literature for PCSOs published by the Home Office (2006) describes their role as reducing crime, the fear of crime and anti-social behaviour by

being highly visible within the community; dealing with minor offences; and supporting front-line policing.

### Method

This report summarises findings from an analysis of PCSO Activity Based Costing (ABC) data from 2006/07. ABC data is collected from each force over a two-week period every year. During the data collection period, all officers and other operational staff working in multifunction units (e.g. Criminal Investigation Department, Traffic, Basic Command Unit, Response Teams) record their activities against a list of 48 pre-defined activity codes.<sup>2</sup> All forces in England and Wales are required to submit ABC data to the Home Office, with a 90 per cent return rate required on Activity Sampling Cards. The data used in this analysis are therefore representative at the national level. However, ABC data may be inconsistent between and within forces due to differences in local priorities and variations in how individual activities are defined. As a result the findings presented here should be classed as indicative rather than conclusive. Grouping similar or related activity codes into meaningful categories, as done in this analysis, helps mitigate the effects of any local variations in recording.

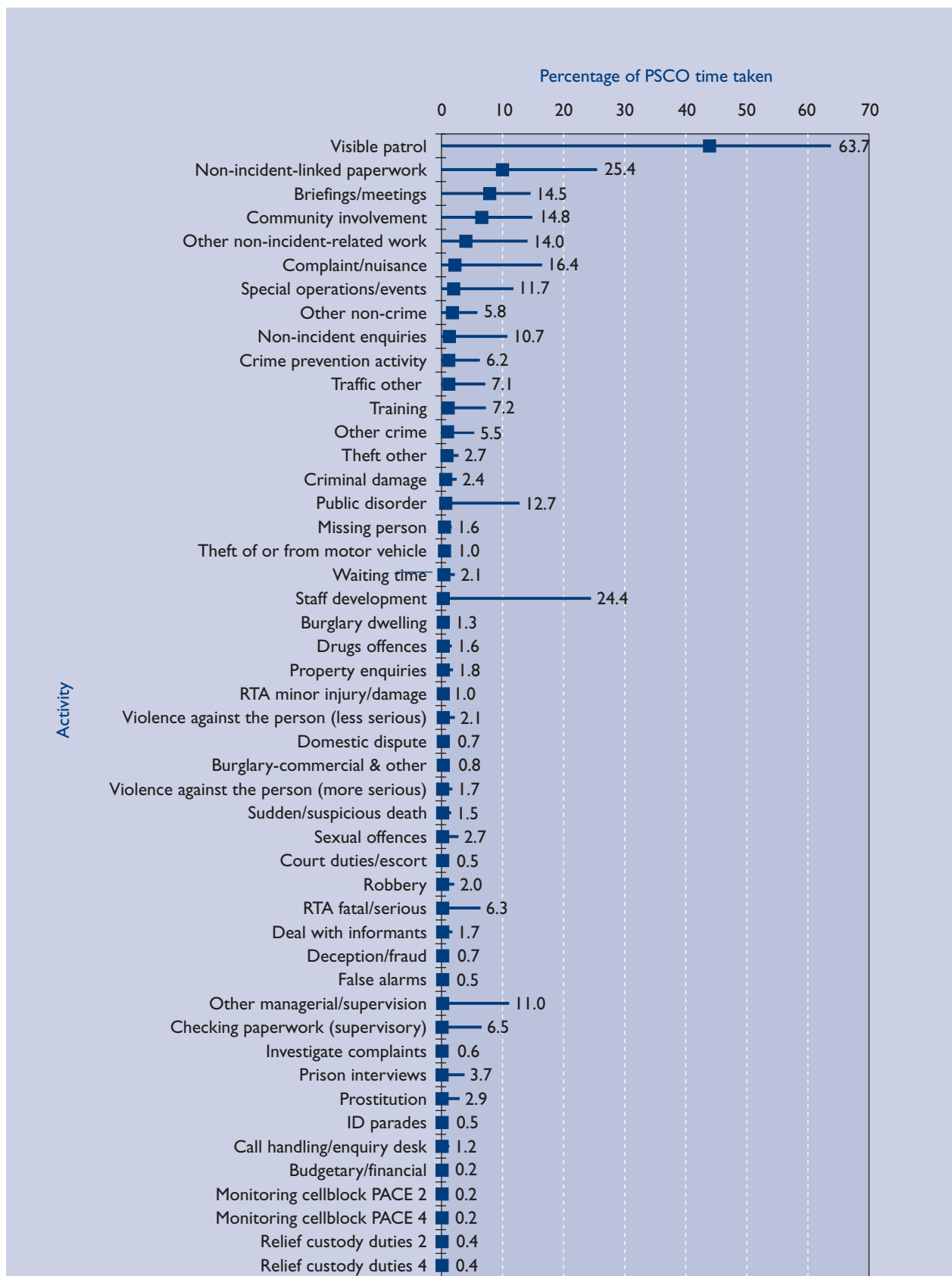
Data from the 2006/07 ABC exercise were analysed to assess the proportion of time that PCSOs spend on each individual activity. Individual activity codes were then grouped together into categories which closely approximated the Home Office role guidance (reducing fear of crime, dealing with minor offences and supporting front-line policing) to allow a snapshot assessment of how much time PCSOs spend on these broad areas.

<sup>1</sup> Association of Chief Police Officers of England, Wales & Northern Ireland (2002) *Guidance on Police Community Support Officers (PCSOs)*. ACPO. London. This guidance, created in December 2002, was reviewed on 22 June 2005. Amendments were made to chapters 1, 3, 7, 9 and 10.

<sup>2</sup> This analysis has excluded 'breaks' and focused on time spent on active patrol

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The markers on each line show the 'median' or middle point of the range of percentages from each force, for each activity, and are intended to be an indicator of how 'consistent' the data are across forces. The activities are arranged by median to show those activities used most frequently by the most forces. Activities with the highest medians are those activities where the data between forces is more evenly distributed (i.e. where there are less extreme values from one or two individual forces such as complaint/nuisance for example). The activities where the marker is roughly in the middle of the line are those where there is a consistent spread of times taken on activities between forces. While those with an 'off-centre' marker are those where the highest or lowest value is often much higher or lower than the rest of the general range

## Findings

### *Individual activities*

Visible patrol was the activity carried out most frequently by PCSOs in 42 of the 43 forces. Visible patrol, non-incident-linked paperwork, briefings and meetings and community involvement were the four activities carried out most frequently by PCSOs while on active duty in nearly half of all forces (42% or 18 forces) and accounted for two-thirds (66%) of PCSO time in two-thirds of all forces (67% or 29 forces). These activities, particularly visible patrol and community engagement, represent some of the key delivery mechanisms of NP.

However, while these were the main activities carried out by PCSOs, there were differences between forces in the amount of time PCSOs spent on each of these and on the remaining 44 activities. This is illustrated in the chart (Figure 1) where each activity is represented by a horizontal line. The lines show the range of times taken on these activities by PCSOs from different forces: the longer the lines the wider the range of time spent on that individual activity across the 43 forces.

Finally an important point to note is the high proportion of time spent by some forces on staff development. It is worth noting that the data used for this report were collected prior to the full implementation of NP, and during a phase of active recruitment, when one might expect forces to be more strongly engaged in this activity.

### *Home Office guidance*

The individual activity codes illustrated above were grouped together into categories which closely approximated the Home Office role guidance (reducing fear of crime, dealing with minor offences and supporting front-line policing). Analysis found that PCSO activity corresponded well to this guidance. PCSOs from 40 forces spent at least 90 per cent of their time on activities within these broad categories, with PCSOs from all forces spending at least 85 per cent of their time on active duty doing so.

### **Conclusion**

Overall, the findings demonstrate that despite local variation in the amount of time spent on individual activities, PCSO activity corresponds well to Home Office role guidance. The analysis suggests that PCSOs spend the majority of their time being highly visible within the community, dealing with minor offences and supporting front-line policing.