

CELEBRATING 20 YEARS OF POLICE COMMUNITY SUPPORT OFFICERS



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the public service union



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Introduction

This year, Police Community Support Officers (PCSOs) celebrate 20 years of delivering neighbourhood policing. The PCSO role was created by the 2002 Police Reform Act and since that time PCSOs have more than proved their worth.

UNISON is the union for PCSOs. We are proud to represent them and the vital work that they do. We hope that everyone with an interest in policing will join with us and our members to toast the success of PCSOs in delivering neighbourhood policing over the last 20 years. Without PCSOs there simply is no local policing.

PCSOs provide a highly visible police presence. They deter anti-social behaviour, provide reassurance, gather intelligence and work with businesses, schools and statutory partners to keep communities safe. PCSOs are a force for good.

People love PCSOs' visibility, their in-depth knowledge of local areas and their approachability. The PCSO role attracted the highest ever proportion of Black, Asian and Minority Ethnic new joiners to the police service. Put simply, PCSOs are key to maintaining public confidence in policing.

Despite their success, PCSO numbers in England have been cut by 45% since 2010. In Wales, by contrast, the Welsh Government has invested in additional PCSOs, showing very clearly that where there is political will, neighbourhood policing can be actively grown.

So, on this 20-year anniversary, UNISON is calling on the UK Government, MPs, Senedd Members, Chief Constables, Police and Crime Commissioners, Council Leaders and Elected Mayors, to commit to support the PCSO workforce for the next 20 years.



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This will need extra funding to increase PCSO numbers in England. UNISON is calling for an additional 7,600 PCSO posts here to replace those lost since 2010.

By rebuilding the PCSO workforce in England, and by continuing the high level of support in Wales, the police service and the communities it serves have everything to gain.

PCSOs are Visible Policing

‘The fundamental role of the PCSO is to contribute to the policing of neighbourhoods through targeted visible patrol, with the purpose of engaging with and reassuring the public; increasing orderliness in public places; being accessible to communities; and working at a local level with stakeholders to solve or mitigate issues, problems or safety concerns faced by the community.’¹

PCSOs were introduced precisely because police officers, by the nature of their role, are not able to spend the time in communities necessary to build long term confidence and trust. This remains the case today.

PCSOs have always been the backbone of neighbourhood policing. In 2008, PCSOs made up on average 50% of the workforce in community policing teams².

By being visible and present, PCSOs have a unique ability to develop close working relationships with individuals and community bodies, to support vulnerable people and promote community cohesion. This is how trust in policing is built - carefully and painstakingly from the ground up.



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PCSOs have Powers

*'PCSOs have legal powers of enforcement in line with local force requirements to support the successful resolution, prevention and deterrence of local crime. PCSOs are also expected to respond to a wider range of non-criminal issues that contribute to vulnerability and safety within the community. They will be expected to act with discretion, making appropriate use of their designated powers and acting within Force guidelines.'*³

Chief Constables have the discretion to award their PCSOs any power of a police constable that is not in the list of excluded powers in Schedule 10 to the Policing and Crime Act 2017. These powers are potentially very extensive but vary from force to force depending on the PCSO role locally.

UNISON's PCSO members have consistently called for the award of appropriate additional powers to increase their operational effectiveness.

PCSOs are Innovative Problem Solvers

*PCSOs: 'Support the identification and exploration of new ways of working and innovation in community policing, applying critical thinking and problem-solving methodologies to identify solutions to problems in line with evidence-based practice.'*⁴

PCSOs deliver policing in new and innovative ways. They might work in a multi-agency family hub, spend time in schools or universities, undertake safer travel patrol on buses and trains, or give advice to the public on crime prevention and staying safe.



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PCSOs are Crime-Stoppers

Research by the Cambridge Institute of Criminology published in 2016 found that targeting each crime ‘hot spot’ in a city with 21 extra minutes of daily foot patrolling by Police Community Support Officers could save the justice system hundreds of thousands of pounds through prevented crime.⁵

PCSOs are the Eyes and Ears of their Police Force

‘PCSOs will be in a position to gather considerable intelligence, which will need to be processed, in accordance with the intelligence cycle. The potential for PCSOs to gain access to people who might ordinarily resist giving information to a police officer should not be overlooked.’⁶

Because they are embedded in the communities they serve, PCSOs get to know the pattern of criminal and anti-social behaviour on their beat inside out. Their approachability and familiarity mean that the public will open up to them in a way that is simply not possible with police officers. The intelligence provided to forces by their PCSOs is invaluable. Lose your PCSOs, and you lose vital police intelligence.

PCSOs are Diverse

In terms of ethnicity, the PCSO workforce is more diverse than either the police staff workforce, or the police officer workforce.

In March 2021, 10% of PCSOs identified as Black, Asian or Minority Ethnic⁷, compared with 8% of police officers and 8% of police staff.

PCSO ethnic diversity was even higher in the past. Back in 2006, 15% of PCSOs identified as Black, Asian or Minority Ethnic.



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UNISON believes that the cuts to the PCSO workforce since 2010 are largely to blame for the loss of diversity.

In terms of gender, the PCSO workforce is the most balanced part of the police workforce - 47% female and 53% male in March 2021⁸.

The secret to creating a diverse police service, reflective of the communities it serves, is plain for all to see – they are called PCSOs.

PCSO Numbers are Falling in England

Despite the success of the PCSO model, the enthusiasm with which they are greeted by the general public, their ground-breaking diversity levels and crime-stopping abilities, the PCSO workforce has declined in England by 45% since 2010.

All parts of the police workforce were cut significantly because of government austerity following the 2010 election, but PCSOs were worst affected. A double whammy of a 30% reduction in police grant between 2010 and 2018⁹, and the removal of the ringfenced Neighbourhood Policing Fund in 2013, has led to there being 7,635 fewer PCSOs today than there were in 2010.

If we compare the 2010 police workforce numbers across England and Wales with their equivalent in 2021, they look like this:

	March 2010	March 2021	% Shortfall
PCSOs	16,918	9,284	- 45%
Police Staff	83,845	75,934	- 9.4%
Police Officers	143,734	135,301	- 6%



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Norfolk Police took the cuts to another level and abolished its entire PCSO workforce in 2018. UNISON fought the abolition, but it was pushed through. Thankfully, no other force has followed suit, but in many forces in England, PCSO numbers continue to decline.

The following testimony from UNISON PCSO members describes the impact of the austerity cuts on their work:

'When the PCSOs were first cut in 2016, I saw all our amazing community work, through which we had built up good contacts which in turn brought in more intelligence and actually prevented crimes from occurring, all go to waste. Before the cuts, we were doing proactive policing to make sure that community issues were dealt with before they became criminal activity.'

'When the cuts were brought in, this resulted in a 75% reduction on the Safer Neighbourhood Team I work on, and late shifts were abolished removing PCSOs from the streets when we were needed the most. Communities who had depended on us being present were thoroughly let down by this.'

Without new PCSOs in England, neighbourhood policing simply won't recover from the austerity cuts. UNISON is calling for funding (ringfenced if necessary) for police forces in England to recruit 7,600 new PCSOs to replace those cut since 2010.

PCSO Numbers are Rising in Wales

Since 2012, the Welsh Government has funded an additional 500 PCSOs for the four forces in Wales¹⁰. In 2021 the Welsh Government announced an extra £3.7 million for additional PCSOs across Wales, bringing the total budget to support PCSOs to over £22 million¹¹.

The additional 100 posts created by this increased support brings the total PCSO numbers funded by the Welsh Government to 600. This shows very clearly, that where there is political will to protect neighbourhood policing, PCSO numbers can be maintained and even increased.

And Finally

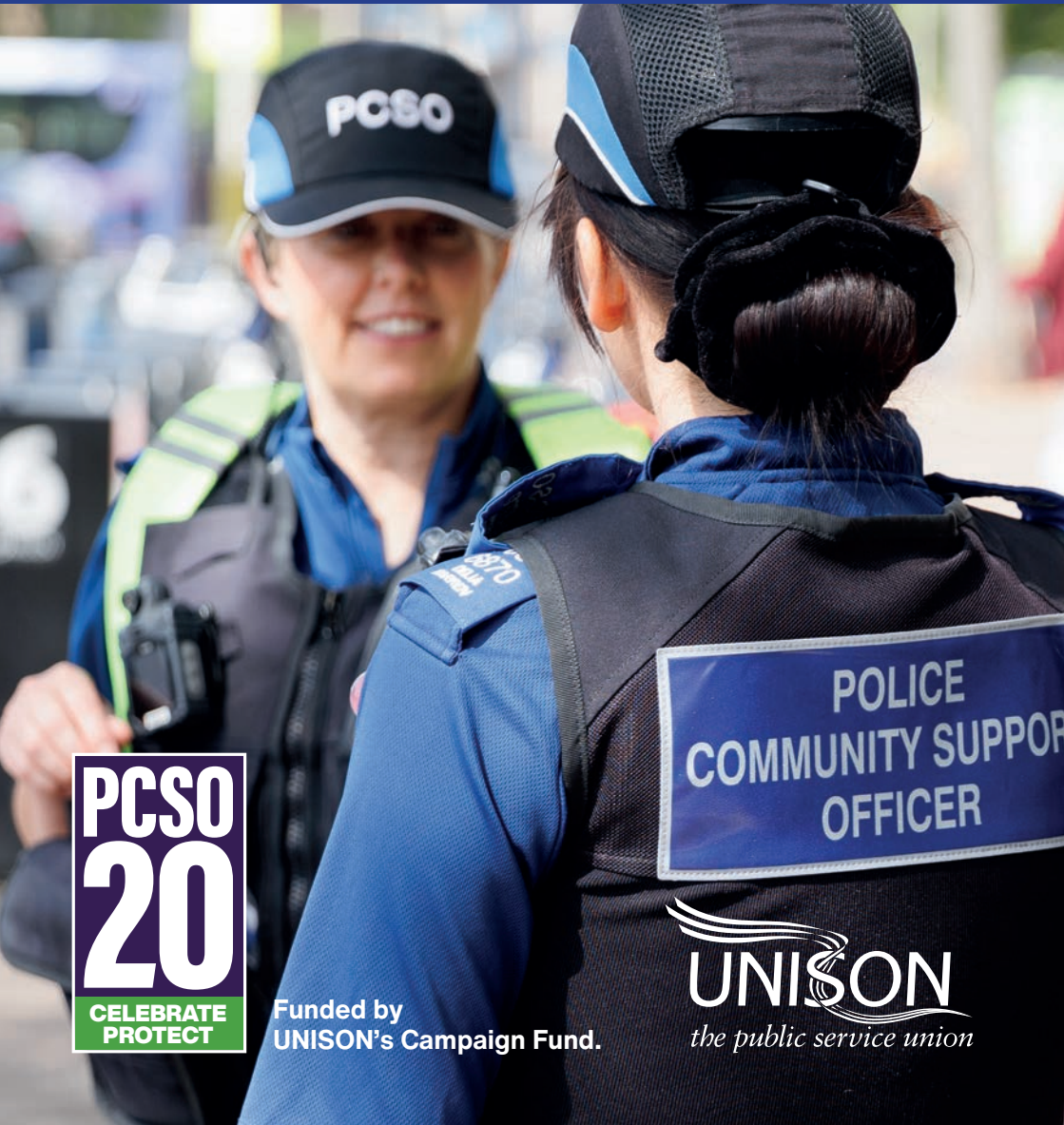
PCSOs have been a great success. For the last 20 years they have been keeping communities safe, deterring and detecting crime and helping to maintain trust and confidence in policing. We owe them all a great debt of gratitude.

But for all their success, their numbers in England have fallen and continue to fall in many forces. This must be addressed with additional funding to rebuild their numbers so that PCSOs can carry on delivering community safety for the next 20 years.

For more information please visit unison.org.uk/pcso20

1. College of Policing:
PCSO National Handbook 2022, p.14
2. https://www.police-foundation.org.uk/2017/wp-content/uploads/2010/10/the_future_of_neighbourhood_policing_final.pdf p.15
3. College of Policing:
PCSO Professional Profile
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4. College of Policing:
PCSO Professional Profile
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5. <https://www.cam.ac.uk/research/news/policing-two-officers-on-the-beat-prevent-86-assaults-and-save-thousands-in-prison-costs>
6. College of Policing:
PCSO National Handbook 2022, p.27
7. National Statistics:
Police Workforce England and Wales
31 March 2021 second edition.
8. National Statistics:
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9. <https://www.instituteforgovernment.org.uk/publication/performance-tracker-2019/police>
10. <https://orca.cardiff.ac.uk/id/eprint/88880/1/150226-wg-funded-community-support-officers-en.pdf>
11. <https://gov.wales/100-new-pcsos-funded-by-the-welsh-government>

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