



Analysis of national Special Constable statistics for England and Wales

**Based upon National Statistics for the Police Workforce, 31st March 2020
(Published July 2020)**

Dr Iain Britton

INTRODUCTION

This analysis of national statistics on the Special Constabulary in England and Wales is based upon the Police Workforce National Statistics. These statistics are published twice annually, relating to 31st March and 30th September, and provide the most reliable source of data on the Special Constabulary over time that is available. The analysis focuses on the Special Constabulary and seeks to identify key trends and strategic issues within the data.

This analysis of national statistics on the Special Constabulary in England and Wales is based upon published data provided through the Police Workforce National Statistics. These statistics are published twice annually, in July (relating to 31st March) a full data set is produced, and in January (relating to 30th September) a headline data set is provided. This analysis provides a summary across this publicly available data.

Accessing the full national published data set:

The Police Workforce National Statistics published since March 2010 for England and Wales can be accessed at: <https://www.gov.uk/government/collections/police-workforce-england-and-wales>

The statistics published prior to March 2010 can be accessed via the Home Office Statistical Bulletins site of the National Archive:

<https://webarchive.nationalarchives.gov.uk/20110218143229/http://rds.homeoffice.gov.uk/rds/hosbarchive.html>

The full open-access data tables for the Police Workforce Statistics for England and Wales can be accessed at: <https://www.gov.uk/government/statistics/police-workforce-open-data-tables>

Comments on interpreting the data

The data published nationally in respect of the Special Constabulary only relates to headcount, joiners, leavers, ethnicity, gender and age. As such, whilst it can provide a detailed insight through time on the numbers and demography of the Special Constabulary, the national data set does not provide any information in terms of activity, performance and effectiveness. Whilst the numbers of Special Constables are very important, particularly in a context such as the present period in which those numbers have been and continue to fall significantly, these workforce statistics should be considered in the round of other data in relation to hours, activity, outputs and outcomes.

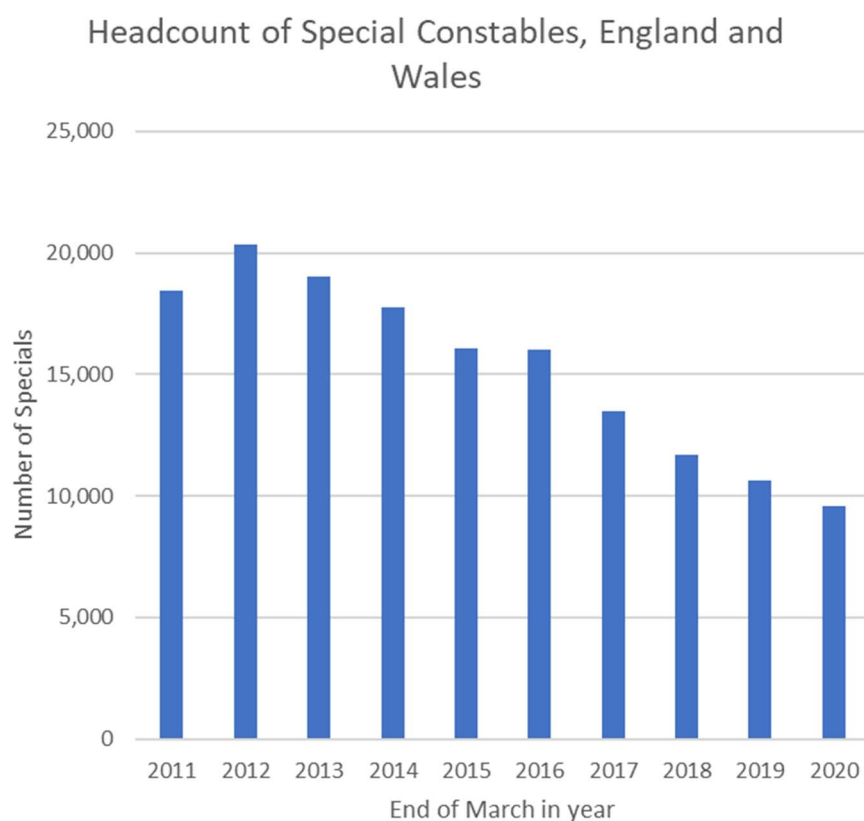
The analysis provided here is also only as accurate as the data provided by forces and published nationally. The national data set appears to tend to overestimate the overall numbers of Special Constables, in part because force data management systems have been slow in removing Special Constables following resignation. There will also be a gap between the formal cohort size of Special Constables reported in official statistics and the 'active' cohort of Special Constables, meaning that a proportion of the Special Constabulary will be dormant but still recorded within these figures. Finally, there are also some inconsistencies of practice between forces, for example different timings for newly recruited Special Constables to be added to the figures.

KEY HEADLINES

- 1) The number of Special Constables is at an historic low, having fallen 53% since 2012 to a current level (not including the British Transport Police) of 9,571 in March 2020. The annual reduction in the year to March 2020 was 10.1%.
- 2) Recruitment into the Special Constabulary in the year to March 2020 has also been at an historic low. This low level of recruitment is the primary driver of the reductions in numbers nationally. This is reflective of recruitment freezes and reductions in recruitment and training capacity available in forces, partly a consequence of higher resourcing of increased Regular recruitment volumes.
- 3) The annual attrition rate – the proportion of Special Constables who have resigned during the year – remains comparatively high at 29.8%. This is mainly reflective of the high proportion of joiners into the Special Constabulary motivated by a career in the Regular service, who tend to have shorter volunteering careers as Special Constables.
- 4) The year to March 2020 was notable in the small number of forces growing their Special Constabularies. And in contrast, 14 forces saw reductions of 20%+ within the year in Special Constable headcount, reflecting the widespread nature of the pattern of reductions.
- 5) The numbers of Special Constables continue to vary widely across forces, with six-fold differences in the sizes of Special Constabularies in terms of Special Constables per 100k population and Special Constables per Regular officer.
- 6) There is little movement in the data in respect of gender and BAME representation, which in March 2020 nationally reflected 28.7% of Special Constables were female and 10.8% identified as BAME. The Special Constabulary has a much higher proportion of officers 25 and under than the Regular service, but this has also been the fastest-shrinking age band in the Special Constabulary cohort over recent years.
- 7) Whilst the most recent annual falls do not signal a softening of pace of reduction (indeed they represent a slight rise from the previous year, and indeed a more marked rise in pace of reduction outside of London), there are signs in wider analysis of the data that the pace of reduction may ‘bottom out’ over the next 2-3 years. The Metropolitan Special Constabulary may already be at that ‘bottoming out’ point, and partly due to an increased volume of recruitment, did not see the sort of reductions that were apparent elsewhere during 2019-2020.

CONTINUING NATIONAL REDUCTIONS IN NUMBERS

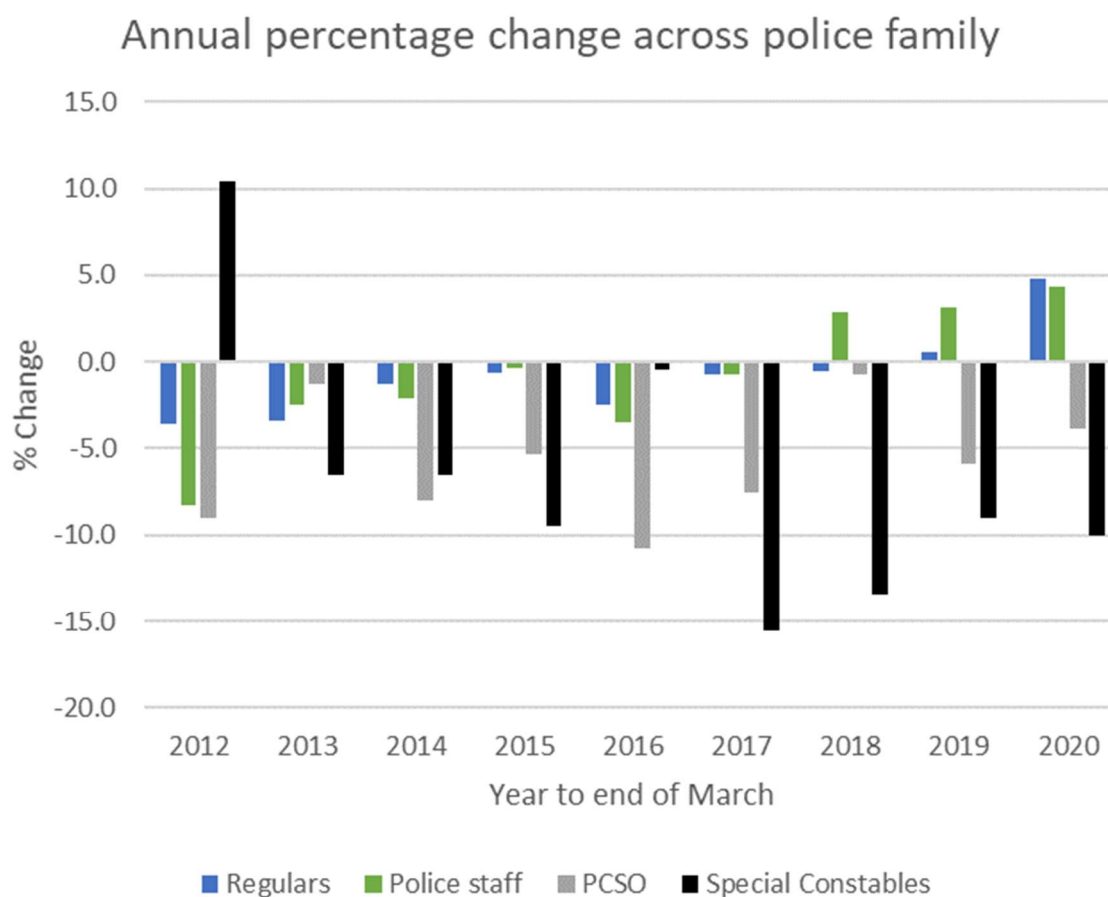
The number of Special Constables has once again fallen in the period to end of March 2020, representing an eighth consecutive year of annual reductions. The headcount of Special Constables at end of March 2020 was **9,571** (excluding BTP, with the addition of British Transport Police the figure is 9,815). This is the lowest figure in modern times, it represents the first time the national total for Special Constables has fallen below 10,000, and it now reflects a total fall of more than half in numbers (53%) from the peak in Special Constabulary headcount in 2012.



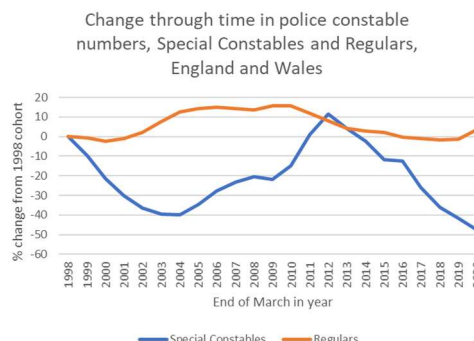
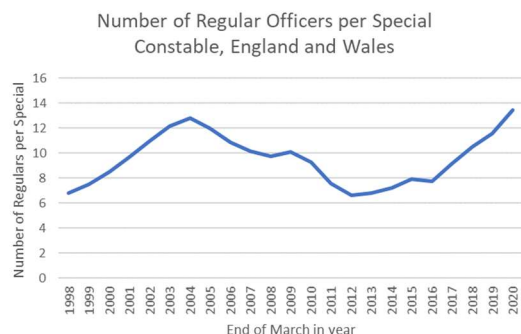
On the whole looking at the data at a national level, there is little sign in the most recent data period of a 'softening' of the downward trend, which as shown in the table below remains with a recent trend of a circa ten percent per year rate of reduction. The -10.1% annual reduction, and -4.7% six monthly reduction, sit broadly in line with the rate of shrinkage of the Special Constabulary over the past 2-3 years. However, there does seem to have been a period of peak rate of reduction in 2016 and 2017, with +15% reductions in 2017, which saw steeper rates of reduction than the more recent two years of data.

	Number of Special Constables	% change on previous six months	% annual change
March 2012	20,343		
September 2012	19,154	-5.9%	-1.3%
March 2013	19,011	-0.7%	-6.5%
September 2013	18,068	-5.0%	-5.7%
March 2014	17,789	-1.5%	-6.4%
September 2014	16,722	-5.6%	-7.3%
March 2015	16,074	-3.9%	-9.4%
September 2015	16,050	-0.1%	-4.3%
March 2016	15,996	-0.3%	-0.5%
September 2016	14,864	-7.1%	-7.3%
March 2017	13,503	-9.2%	-15.6%
September 2017	12,601	-6.7%	-15.2%
March 2018	11,690	-7.2%	-13.4%
September 2018	11,029	-5.7%	-12.5%
March 2019	10,640	-3.5%	-9.0%
September 2019	10,039	-5.6%	-9.0%
March 2020	9,571	-4.7%	-10.1%

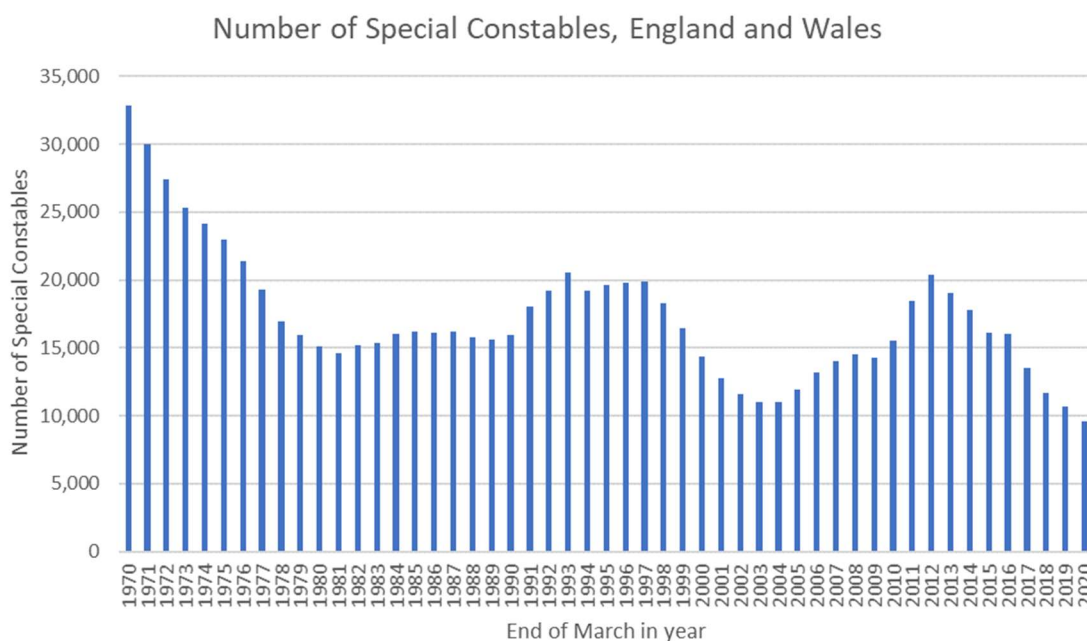
For each of the past four years, Special Constables have been the fastest shrinking element of the police family (compared to data for Regular officers, police staff and PCSOs). Whilst Regulars and police staff have seen a solid growth in numbers in the most recent year (2019 to 2020), Special Constables have in contrast seen a double-digit decrease.



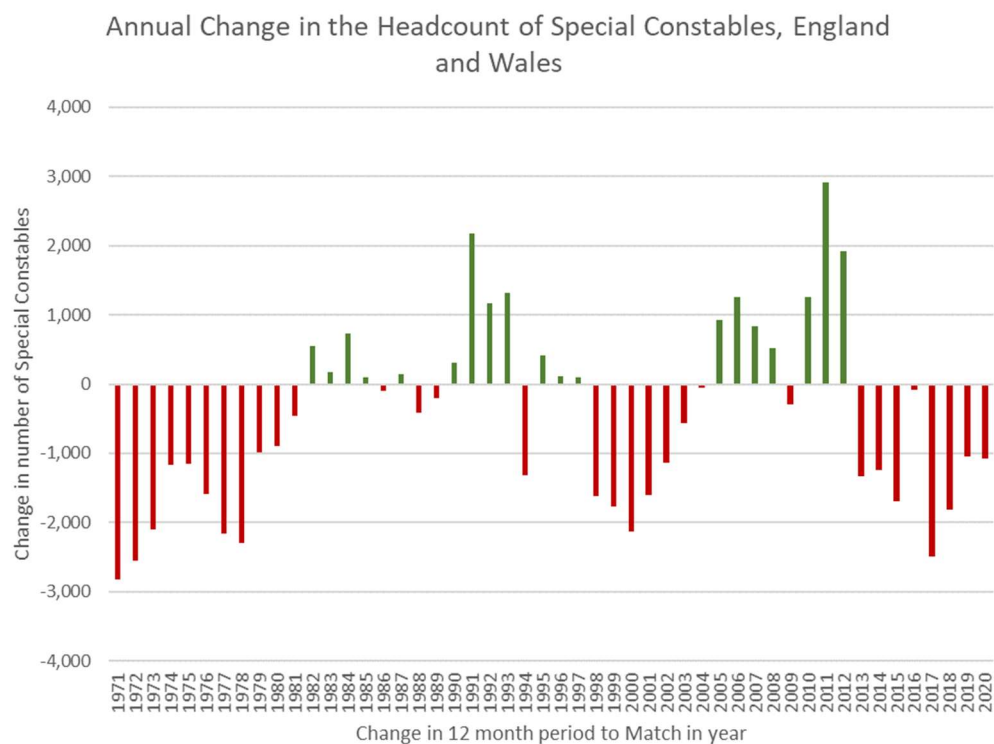
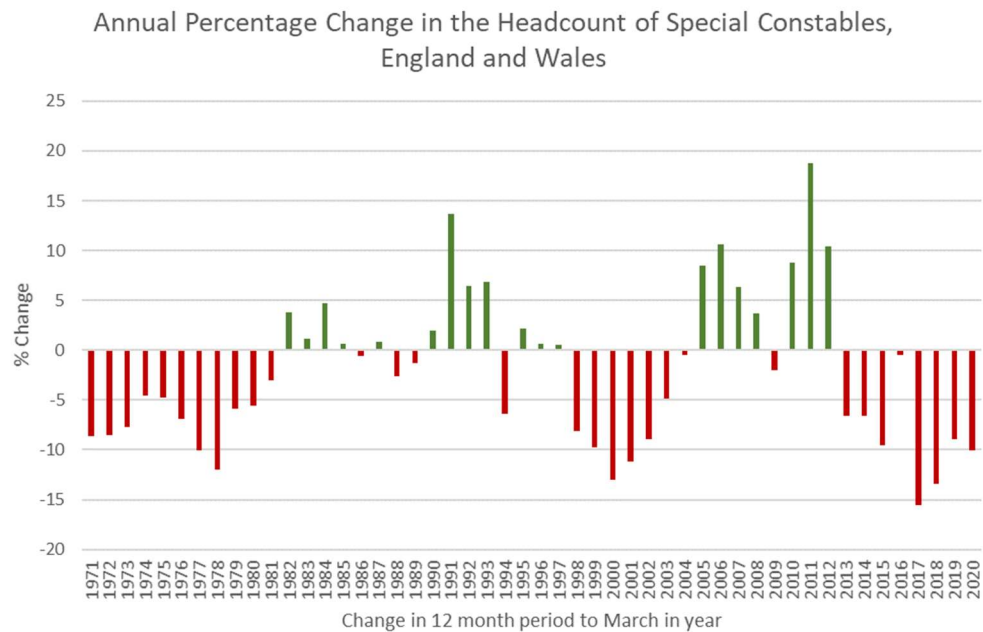
Looking nationally at the number of Regulars compared to the number of Special Constables, the past eight years have seen a shift from a ratio of one Special Constable to every 6.5 Regulars in 2012 nationally to a ratio of one to every fourteen Regulars in March 2020.



Some caution is needed in comparing data over a longer time period, particularly in that data quality and the nature of the Special Constable role have changed a lot in the fifty years since 1970. Nevertheless, it can be helpful to widen the lens and look at current trends over a longer-term perspective. The March 2020 figure of 9,571 Special Constables represents the lowest figure in the past fifty years. The recent reductions now represent the deepest and most sustained fall in numbers nationally since the seventies. The most recent previous major sustained reduction in Special Constables numbers nationally occurred in the late nineties and early noughties, bottoming out after six-seven years, with an overall reduction of 8,886 (44.7%).



The scale of reduction, both in terms of percentage change and in terms of raw numbers, for the period April 2019 to March 2020, is in line with (but very slightly worse) than the 2018-2019 data period.

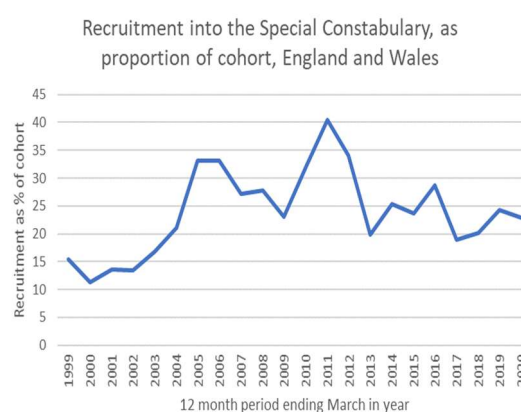
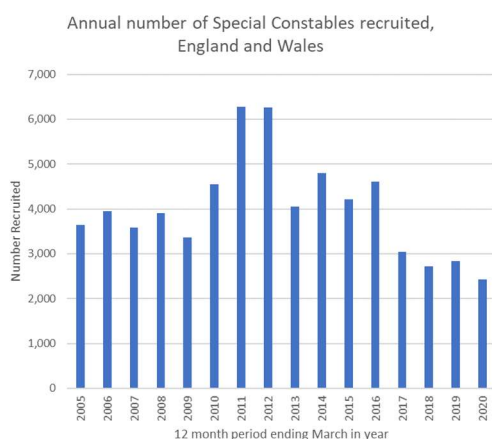


LOW LEVELS OF RECRUITMENT

Relatively low levels of recruitment of Special Constables remains the single most prominent driver underpinning the downward trend, with recruitment levels remaining both well below historical trend, and well below levels of annual attrition (resignations).

Year ending 31st March	Number of Special Constables joining in the year	Recruitment as a % of overall numbers
2008	3,904	27.8
2009	3,358	23.1
2010	4,546	31.9
2011	6,275	40.5
2012	6,263	34.0
2013	4,045	19.9
2014	4,804	25.3
2015	4,217	23.7
2016	4,606	28.7
2017	3,041	19.0
2018	2,723	20.2
2019	2,843	24.3
2020	2,435	22.9

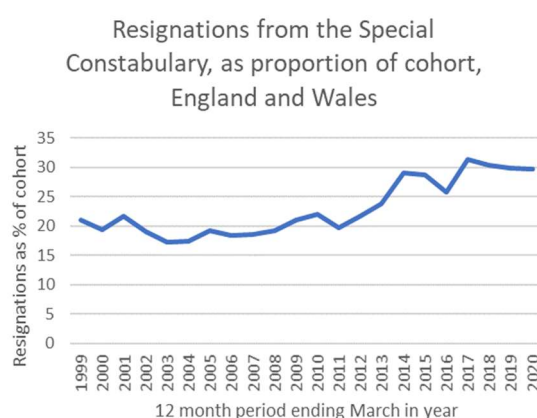
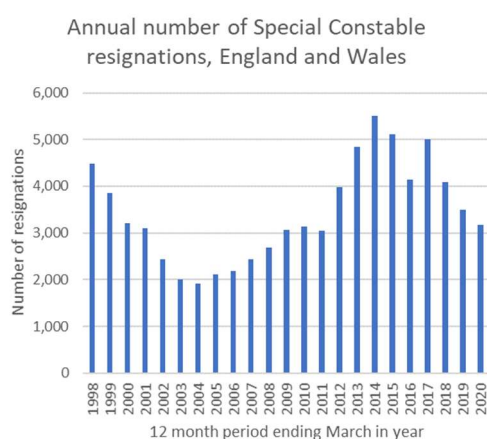
The relatively sharp numerical fall in recruitment first seen in 2016-2017 has continued consistently for the four years since, with recruitment under 3,000 nationally for the third year in succession, and also continuing the trend of being under 25% of cohort size. In broad terms, to stabilise at the current numbers and prevent ongoing reduction, nationally across forces another 600-800 additional Special Constables would need to be recruited annually, arguably not that material a shift from the current position. To achieve and sustain growth of the cohort over a 3-5 year period back up to levels seen in recent years (e.g. circa 15-16,000) would however a much greater shift, in the region of a doubling of current volumes of recruitment.



HIGH LEVELS OF RESIGNATION

Levels of resignations from the Special Constabulary remain above historical trend, sitting at circa 30% of cohort (three in ten Special Constables leaving each year). The data for resignations has not yet seen a notable uptick in respect of the Uplift programme. It may be that the period April 2019-March 2020 is relatively early to begin seeing the scale of any Uplift programme effect on the Special Constabulary data in this way. It may also be that the linkage between volume of Regular recruitment and rate of Special Constabulary resignation is weaker than often assumed.

Year ending 31st March	Number of Special Constables leaving in the year	% attrition
2008	2,690	19.2
2009	3,071	21.1
2010	3,130	22.0
2011	3,052	19.7
2012	3,983	21.6
2013	4,837	23.8
2014	5,515	29.0
2015	5,110	28.8
2016	4,138	25.7
2017	5,008	31.3
2018	4,095	30.3
2019	3,494	29.9
2020	3,168	29.8



Whilst levels of resignation reflect both patterns of Regular recruitment and issues of leadership, support and quality of experience for Special Constables, by far the most significant factor is the make-up of recruitment and cohort. On the whole, as would be expected, younger Special Constables who have an interest in joining the Regular service have shorter volunteering careers as a Special Constable than do older Special Constables who do not harbour ambitions to join the Regulars.

CHANGE IN NUMBERS AT INDIVIDUAL FORCE LEVEL

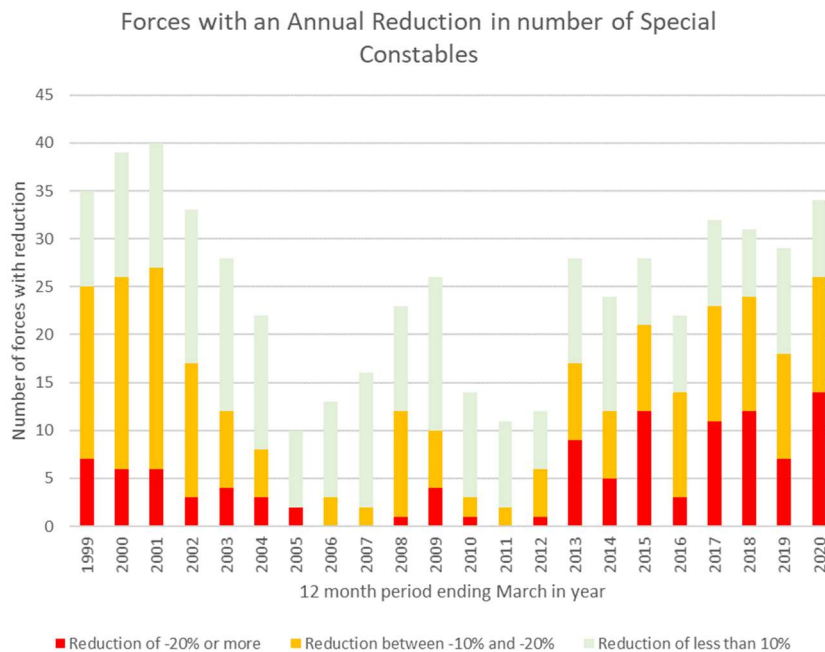
There is less growth evident across the country in Special Constabularies in April 2019-March 2020 than was the case in the preceding twelve-month period April 2018-March 2019. Only seven forces saw growth in numbers, and only four of those in double-digits. This makes the most recent annual period in the data to be an outlier year in this respect, showing markedly less pattern of growth in forces than would usually be the case – indeed 2018-2019 with which it is compared in the below table was itself a lean year in terms of growth forces.

Growth forces, 2018-2019		Growth forces, 2019-2020	
Essex	90	South Wales	52
Hertfordshire	36	West Midlands	41
Cleveland	32	Gwent	25
Nottinghamshire	24	Kent	16
West Midlands	24	Cleveland	4
Surrey	20	Essex	4
Merseyside	18	Suffolk	1
North Wales	17		143
Norfolk	10		
Dorset	10		
West Yorkshire	7		
Wiltshire	5		
City of London	5		
Gloucestershire	2		
	300		

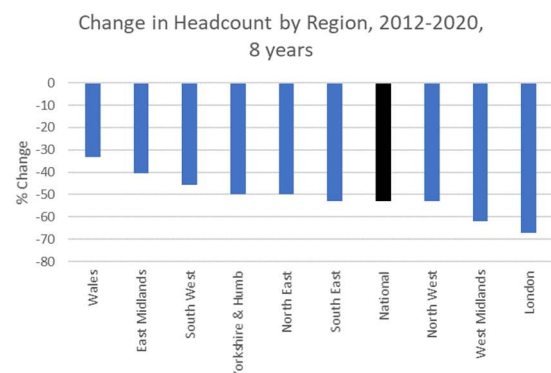
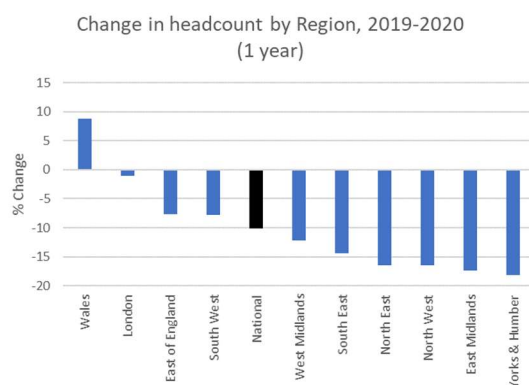
The pattern of largest numerical reductions across forces (the table below shows the top ten numerical reductions nationally) has changed markedly, most particularly relating to the Metropolitan Special Constabulary (discussed further below). Whilst the overall numerical reduction in numbers nationally is broadly the same in 2018-2019 and 2019-2020, the pattern is markedly different, with the 2019-2020 period seeing less impact of very large reductions in key forces, instead a more dispersed pattern of reductions distributed across a larger number of forces.

Largest reductions, 2018-2019		Largest reductions, 2019-2020	
Metropolitan	-386	West Yorkshire	-97
West Mercia	-189	Hampshire	-83
GMP	-95	Leicestershire	-73
Sussex	-79	West Mercia	-65
Devon & Cornwall	-79	Merseyside	-65
Lancashire	-73	Thames Valley	-52
Warwickshire	-55	Lancashire	-52
Northamptonshire	-53	Hertfordshire	-51
Leicestershire	-51	Cheshire	-50
Suffolk	-37	Nottinghamshire	-43

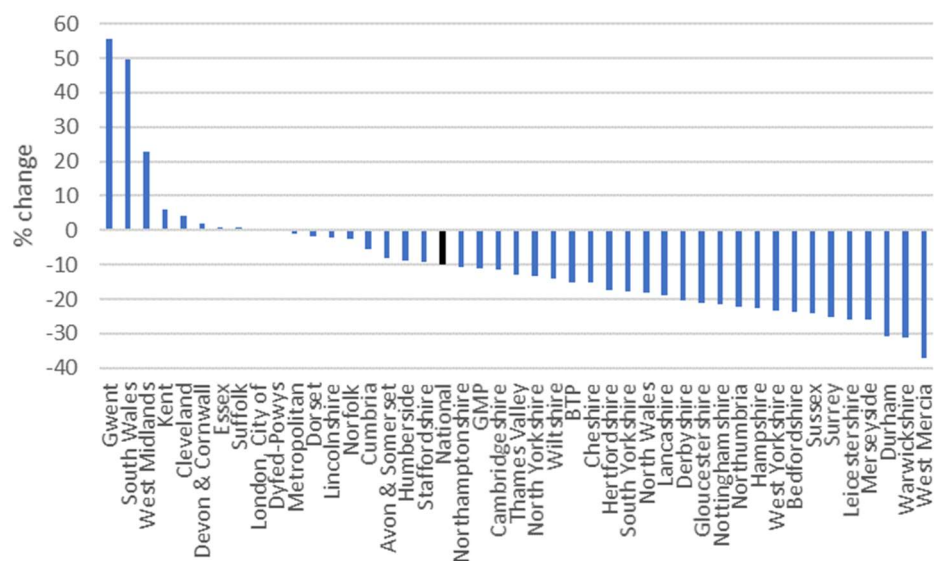
As shown in the graph below, overall, the pattern of reduction is a little more broadly distributed across forces than has been the case in recent years. The graph shows the number of forces showing reducing numbers in each year. Comparing 2019-2020 to the preceding year, there has been a quite sharp increase (a doubling) of forces showing 20% plus annual reductions, with 14 forces (up from 7) shrinking by over a fifth within the year. This is – as shown by the heights of the red columns in the graph – the largest number of forces showing a 20% reduction in numbers recorded in any year over the past two decades.



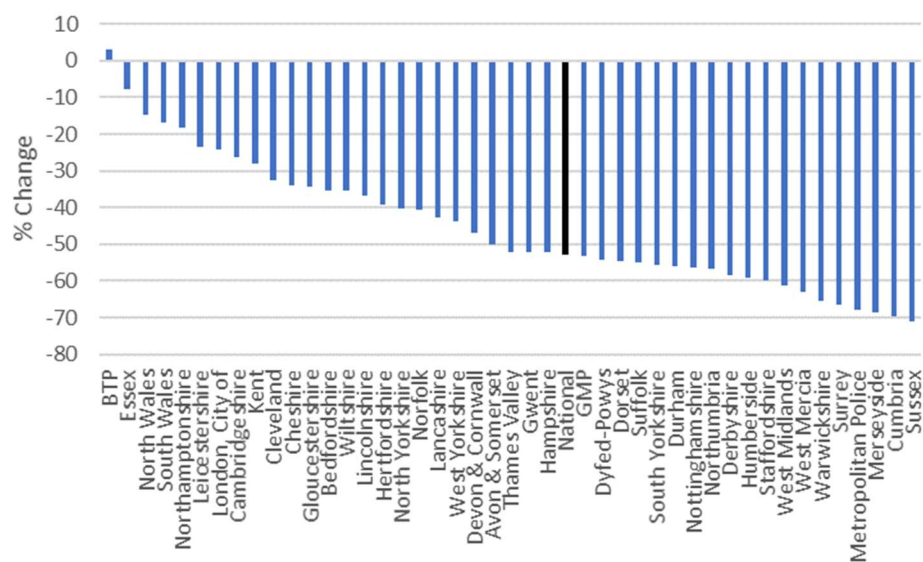
The four graphs below show the pattern of reductions by force, and by region, both the recent one year change period (2019-2020) and the whole eight year period of change (2012-2020) since the peak in Special Constable numbers in 2012.



Percentage change in Special Constable headcount, March 2020 compared to March 2019

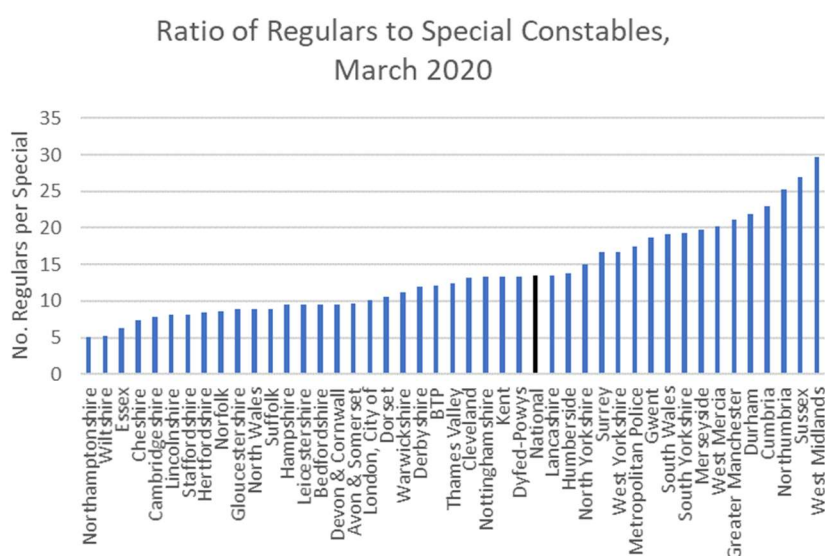
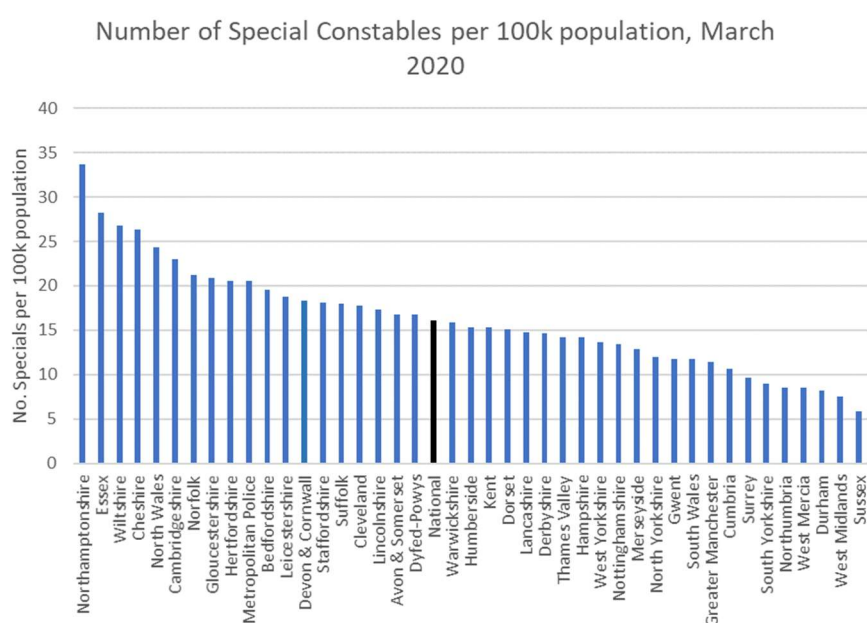


Percentage change in Special Constable headcount, March 2020 compared to March 2012



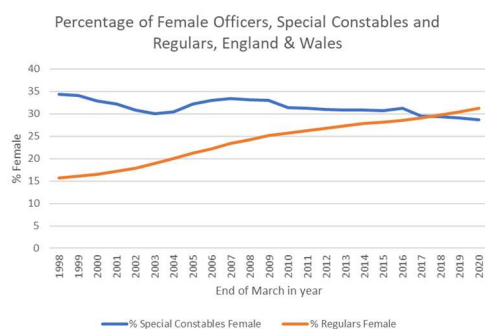
COMPARING THE SIZE OF SPECIAL CONSTABULARIES

There is a considerably greater degree of variation between Special Constabularies across different police forces than there is across other elements of police workforce statistics, with a six-fold different in scale between largest and smallest Special Constabularies. The scale of this difference is often missed in discussions nationally on the Special Constabulary, but it is clearly fundamental to future considerations of strategy and investment. In part this scale of difference is reflective of the relative lack of a consistent national model for Special Constables, something which is beginning to be addressed through the national Special Constabulary strategy and within the work plan of the national Special Constabulary working group, supported by NPCC portfolios and by the College of Policing.

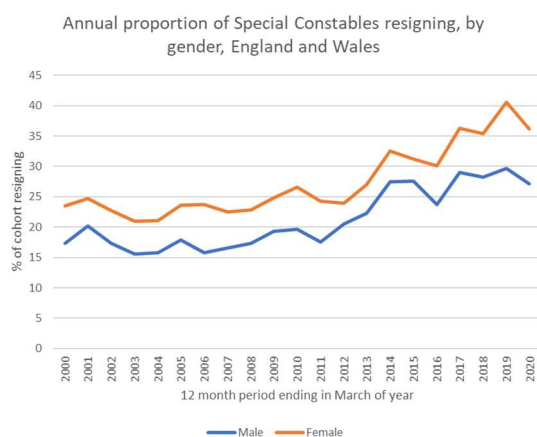


GENDER

Approximately three in ten Special Constables are female. This is broadly consistent with the proportion that has been seen over the past two decades. Looking across the past two decades, the proportion of Regular female officers has slowly but steadily grown whilst the proportion of female Special Constables has remained broadly the same (slightly falling). The Regular service has now overtaken the Special Constabulary in respect of female representation.



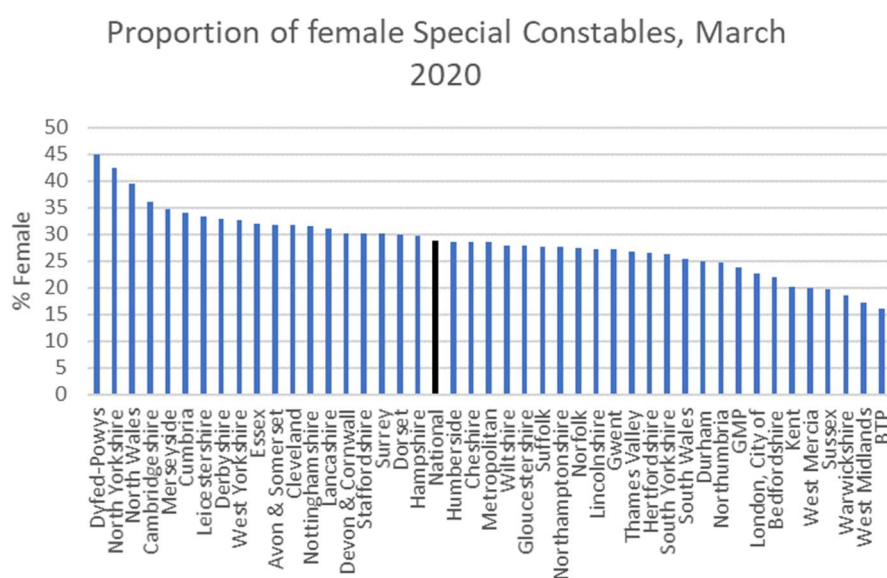
As has consistently been the case for the past two decades, a greater proportion of female than male Special Constables have resigned over the past year. This gender-attrition gap has widened in the past 3-4 years. There is some complexity in interpreting this, for example it may be in part that some of this gap can be accounted for by female Specials who have an aspiration to join the Regular service being on average more successful at making that move more quickly than their male counterparts. Nevertheless, any gender-resignation gap should be of concern, and it does contribute to Special Constabulary cohorts in the majority of forces having few (sometimes no) longer-serving female volunteer officers, which in turn has an impact for elements such as gender representation in senior roles and within specialist areas of policing.



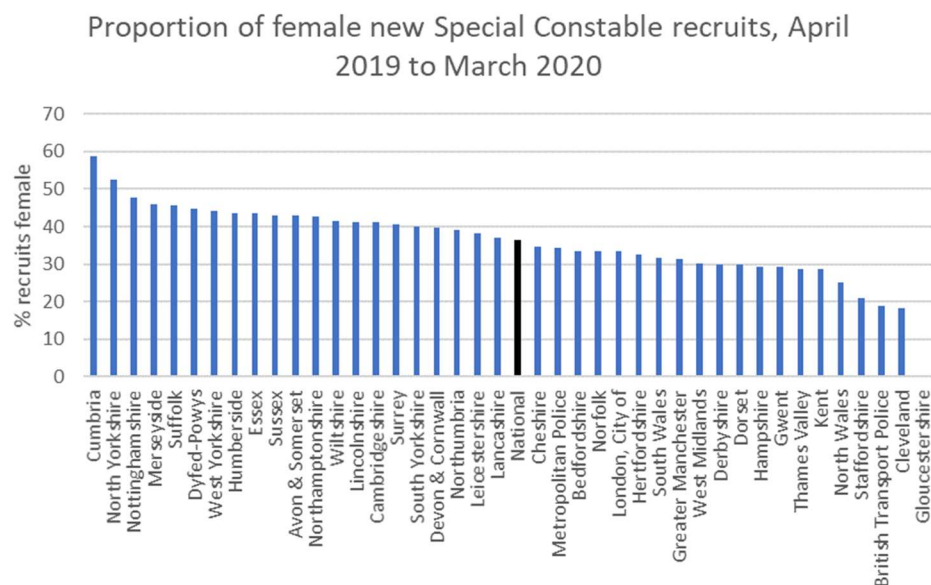
As would be expected given the differential rate of resignation by gender, the proportion of female recruits is slightly higher than that for the cohort as a whole. The proportion of Regular recruits who are female has for the first time overtaken the proportion of female Special Constable recruits, and over the past 6-8 years there has been a pattern of increase in proportion of female Regulars whereas the proportion for Special Constables who are recruited being female has remained broadly flat for the same period.



As has been the case in previous data, there is again a very wide variation in the proportion of female Special Constables across different forces. Some of this pattern (such as lower representation for e.g. BTP, City of London, West Midlands, Kent) reflects consistent patterns in the data over time. There is also a tendency, once again reflected in these latest figures, for forces with higher recent recruitment levels (and thus a higher proportion of newer Special Constables and a lower proportion of longer-serving Special Constables) to have higher female representation.

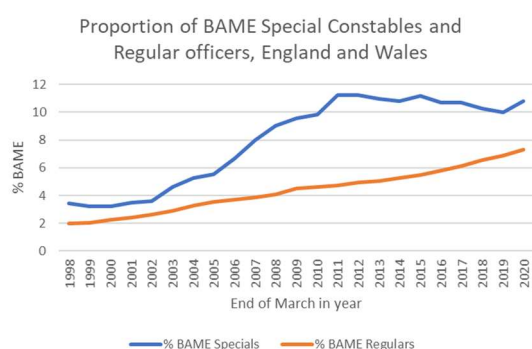


The proportion of female SCs recruited also shows a wide variation nationally over the past year. In the period April 2019 to March 2020, two forces (Cumbria and North Yorkshire) recruited more female than male Special Constables. At the other end of the spectrum, no recruits in Gloucestershire were female, and less than a fifth of recruits were female in BTP and Cleveland. Some caution should be exercised with these comparisons, given the very low volumes of recruitment in some forces (and indeed some forces nationally are missing from the graph below because they did not recruit at all during 2019-2020, so have no recruitment data to compare).

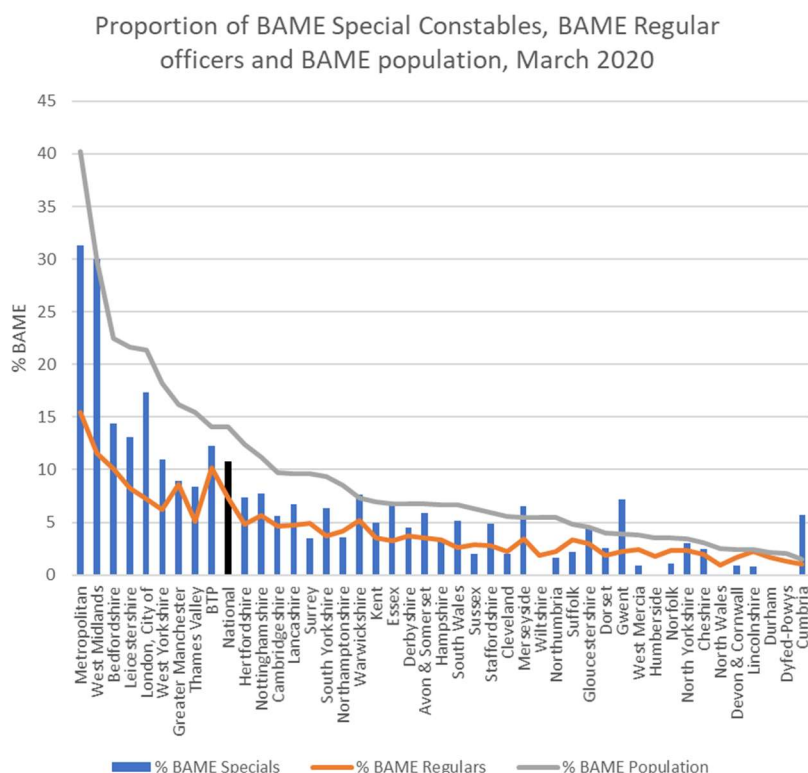


ETHNICITY

The proportion of BAME Special Constables has seen a slight increase over the past year. This is primarily reflective of the geography of overall numbers, and of recruitment and attrition, over the past year. In particular, that both the West Midlands and particularly the Metropolitan Special Constabulary, have seen recruitment and have seen stabilisation or slight increase in overall numbers, given that both forces have significantly above national average diversity in terms of BAME, reflecting the areas that they serve.

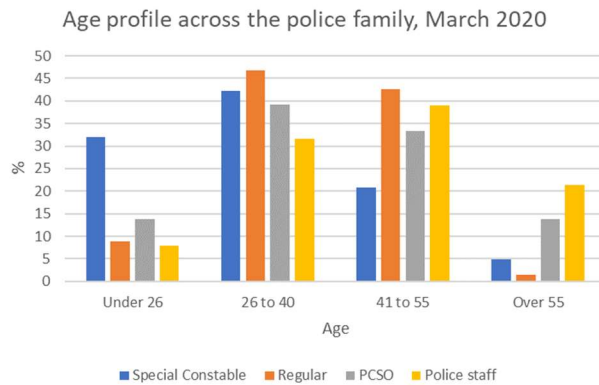


The graph below shows the percentage of BAME population overall for each force area (the grey line), together with proportion of BAME Regulars (the brown line) and the proportion of BAME Special Constables (the blue bars).

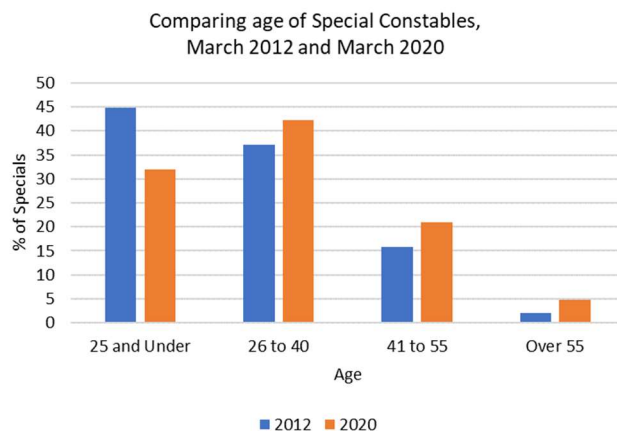


AGE

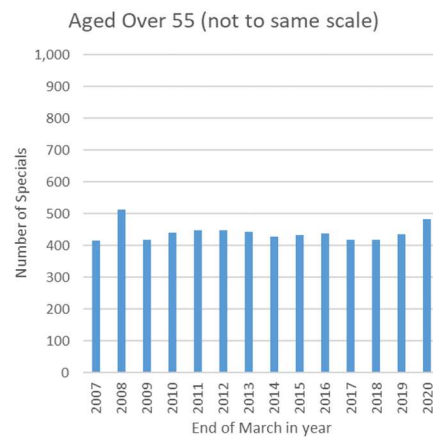
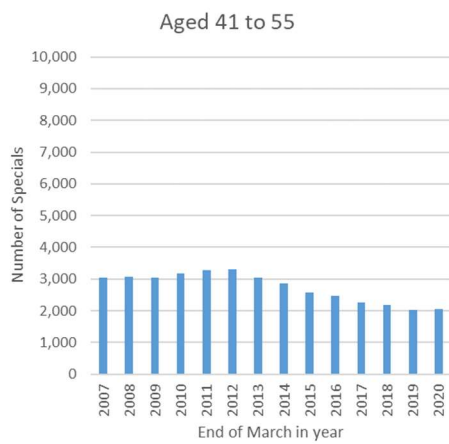
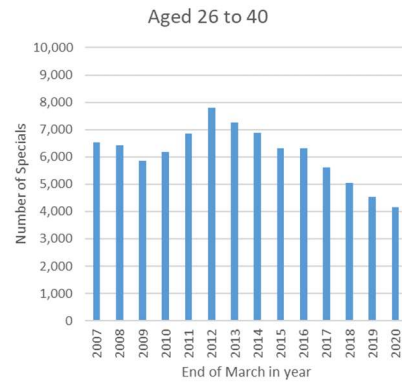
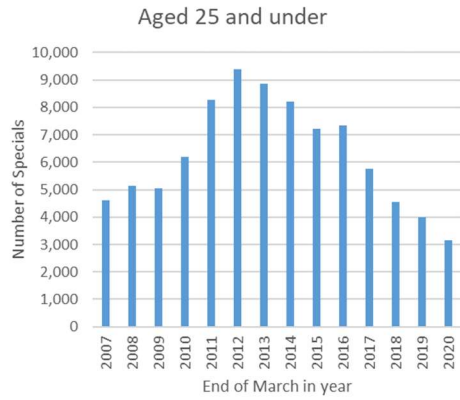
As would be expected, given the large volume of recruitment of younger Special Constables interested in a future career as a Regular officer, the Special Constabulary has a much larger proportion aged under 26 than other elements of the police family.



Having said that, over time the Special Constabulary has been ‘getting older’ in terms of the overall cohort – In 2012 45% of Special Constables were under 26, in 2020 this has reduced to a third.

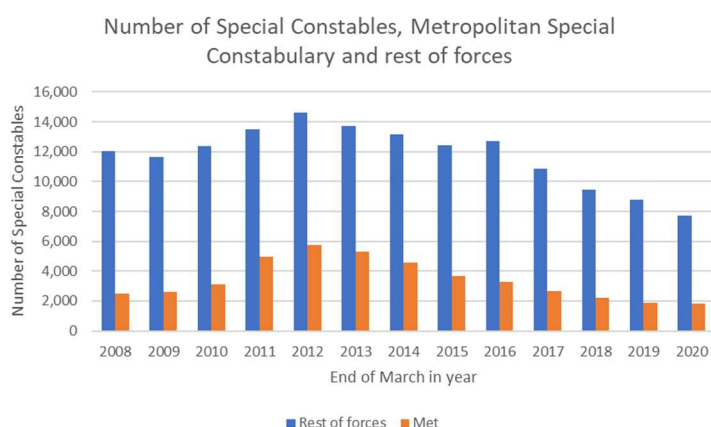
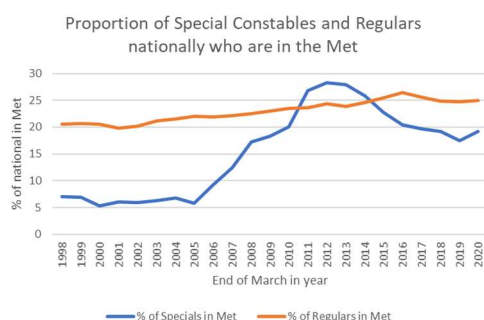


This may be reflective to some degree of shifts towards a Special Constabulary cohort which has a larger proportion who are older, longer serving, ‘career’ Special Constables. It may be that this shifting in age profile and in overall cohort shape has some protective effect in terms of the impact on Special Constable numbers of the national Uplift programme.



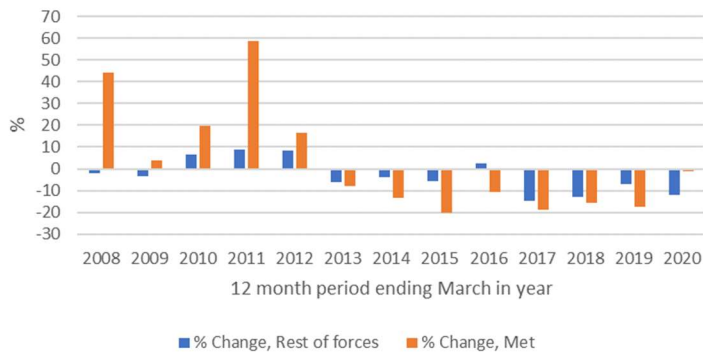
THE METROPOLITAN SPECIAL CONSTABULARY

The Metropolitan Special Constabulary continues to represent a sizeable proportion of the Special Constabulary nationally (almost a fifth, 19.2%, in March 2020), and therefore it is always important to fully understanding changes at national level as a whole to understand the pattern of change within the Met. The MSC was also disproportionate both in a greater extent of growth (primarily relating to the Olympics) and then in larger reductions in numbers, in terms of the 2012-centred peak in national numbers.

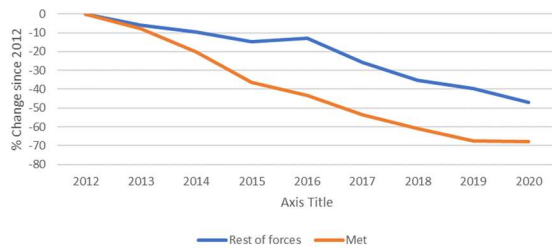


Over the past eight years, first driven by comparatively high attrition in the Met (the 2012 peak eroding through to about 2015), and then by low recruitment volumes (between 2016 and 2019), the Metropolitan Special Constabulary has tended to have an ‘amplifying’ effect on the national trend. In the most recent data period 2019 to 2020, the Met has largely stabilised numbers for the first time in several years (shrinking by only 1%), and therefore the vast majority of the falls this year represent reductions outside of London. In effect, the Met has for the first time for several years, had an effect of ‘damping down’ the overall scale of reductions nationally, rather than amplifying the national trend.

Percentage annual change in Special Constables,
Metropolitan Special Constabulary and rest of
forces

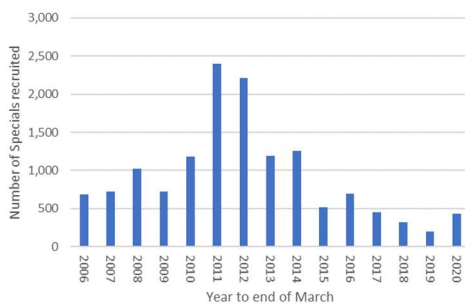


Percentage change in Special Constable numbers since
2012, Metropolitan Special Constabulary and rest of
forces

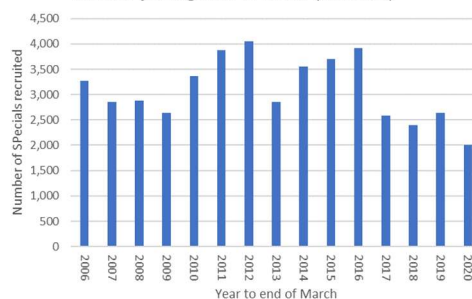


Whilst volumes of recruitment remain much lower than historical patterns for the MSC, the volume of recruitment has seen a very positive marked rise in 2019-2020 compared to recent annual periods. In contrast, recruitment has fallen in the rest of forces nationally, to a level (at only 2,000 Special Constables) which is significantly lower than historic trend. It is primarily this figure which is drawing down the data in terms of headcount across forces nationally.

Number of Special Constables joining the MSC



Number joining Rest of forces (not MSC)



FUTURE PREDICTIONS

The factors driving the current reductions in Special Constabulary numbers are complex, and our understandings of them are only partial.

In terms of analysing the falls in numbers since 2012:

- A proportion of the reductions over this period represents an adjustment following the large-scale recruitment drive, based around the Olympics and the 2008 strategy and related investment nationally. This rise, and subsequent fall, was particularly marked in the Metropolitan Special Constabulary. This 'bounce back' following the peaks in recruitment 2009-2012 was a significant part of reductions in the 2013-2016 period. It has now effectively worked itself out of the system and is no longer a material factor in more recent reductions over the past two or three years.
- The reductions are a national-scale phenomenon. Virtually every force has seen significant reduction in numbers since 2012, and for a half of forces this has represented a halving (or more) of numbers. In the most recent annual period April 2019 to March 2020, fourteen forces saw numbers reduced by 20% or more, and three quarters of forces saw reductions. Whilst in the earlier period of reductions (and reflecting the point above) the Metropolitan Special Constabulary saw larger reductions than other areas of the country and had an amplifying effect on the scale of reduction nationally, in the past year the Met has had a 'damping' effect on the overall national figure.
- Where numbers are falling more heavily in forces over more recent years, the single most significant factor in common driving those reductions at force level appears to be freezes in recruitment, or very sharp constraints in volume of recruitment. Looking across the data, the patterns over the past two or three years point towards this being a recruitment-driven reduction. Those forces with larger falls in numbers over the past two or three years do not generally have higher than typical attrition rates but do have lower than typical recruitment rates. The forces which have seen most profound falls in numbers have all been subject to prolonged periods of frozen recruitment.
- Having said that, the rate of resignation from the Special Constabulary is above historic trend. This seems likely mainly driven by a rising in the proportion of Special Constables who are interested in transitioning into a paid career as a Regular officer, and the relatively short period of time they remain as Special Constables. Any sustained impact on retention and extending volunteer career length needs to focus on attracting and retaining more 'career' Special Constables.
- Analysis would suggest that the national Uplift programme may have more of a direct effect in exacerbating constraints on recruitment, than through increasing flows of Special Constables into the Regulars, albeit the latter is also possible. A clearer effect in terms of the Uplift programme should emerge in coming months.
- Previous periods of reduction have tended to be followed by national investment and planning to coordinate growth in recruitment. There are significant strategic developments at national level, but it is too early to assess the extent to which these will impact at scale across the figures.

Despite there being little 'softening' in rate of reduction nationally for the 2019-2020 data, there do seem to be some indicators in the data that the falls of the past eight years may be beginning to 'bottom out'. Whilst there appears little at present to point to a hope for significant reversal of the falls and to an expansion in numbers, there does seem some grounds for a prediction that numbers will begin to flatten off rather than to continue to reduce at current rates. To the degree that the above analysis is right and that present reductions are primarily recruitment-driven, mathematically one would expect to see some levelling-off effect on those trends in the next 1-2 years, simply on the basis that as the Special Constabulary cohort as a whole shrinks in size, the recruitment volume needed to retain it at that smaller size also reduces proportionately.

A reasonably mid-point prediction of future trend would currently predict Special Constable numbers to 'level off' at somewhere in the region of 8,500-9,000 in the next 1-2 years, and then to remain stable thereafter. Clearly changes in policy and investment nationally might drive that figure upwards and perhaps lead to something more akin to the 'best case' prediction shown below, which might see some moderate grow-back in headcount towards 10,000 Special Constables nationally across England and Wales.

