

Police and Crime Panel update – November 2020

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Purpose of Report

To provide an update on emerging issues and the impact of Covid-19 on the Community Safety and Criminal Justice Plan: Everybody's Business and effects on the delivery plan.

Overview

Along with the rest of the country, on 23 March the Office of the Police and Crime Commissioner (OPCC) for Hertfordshire had to radically change the way that it operated. Fortunately, the work of the office has lent itself to a remote environment, and staff quickly adapted to new ways of working. As such, remote working has been successful and the broad range of responsibilities carried out by the PCC and OPCC have continued unabated.

The office has remained partially open throughout the lockdown for those staff who do not have a suitable environment to work from home, and since July all staff have been enabled to work in the office should they wish to do so. With the announcement of new restrictions from 5 November, this arrangement will remain in place.

At the beginning of lockdown, crime fell significantly and the introduction of new regulations required frontline officers to quickly adapt to a new environment, including the use of PPE in double crewed cars and when engaging with the public. The constabulary followed the 4 Es approach to those breaching the restrictions: engage, explain, encourage and enforce. The experience gained from March to July stands the constabulary in good stead to support the introduction of new regulations from 5 November.

Financially, it has been a challenging time for the whole public sector. The impact of Covid on Council Tax returns, and therefore income from the policing precept, is still unknown but likely to be significant. The 21/22 settlement will likely be announced in January. The Government has signalled its continued commitment to the officer uplift programme, the cost of PPE is being met, an additional grant for officer overtime incurred due to implementation of Covid restrictions has been received, and the Home Office have outlined support to partially meet lost income. This income is essential to the future financial health of the constabulary. At the end of the 19/20 financial year, constabulary/OPCC reserves stood at 7.4% of income.

As Panel members will be aware from discussion of the Community Safety and Criminal Justice (CSCJ) Plan delivery plan at the last meeting, we are currently in year 1 of the 5 year plan. Delivery has continued in all scheduled areas, the policy and partnerships team at the OPCC is now fully staffed with two new starters, and ability to deliver on CSCJ Plan actions has not been adversely impacted by the restrictions and change in working practices.

Grant funding rounds have all been conducted within planned timescales with grants awarded to successful bidders, and a PCC Covid emergency support fund was launched at the beginning of lockdown, administered by the Hertfordshire Community Foundation. The Complaints Resolution

Team is transacting business successfully with a model of office and home working that has demonstrated that the work undertaken is particularly suited to a remote environment. Some of the Victims and Commissioning Team retendering plans were delayed due to the Covid restrictions, with contracts making use of the extension clauses, enabling constructive discussions between the OPCC and Hertfordshire County Council about aligning commissioning cycles and undertaking more co-commissioning in the future. Collaboration Board work has continued, with 23 October seeing Fire HQ move to the Police HQ site at Stanborough, and discussions about rebranding the site are underway.

From 23 March to the beginning of August, Independent Custody Volunteer visits in person were not possible. A remote scheme was set up with phone calls and dip sampling custody records. Physical visits began again in August and will continue during the November Covid restrictions.

Perhaps the biggest negative impact of Covid as far as the work of the OPCC and constabulary are concerned has been the temporary closure of the court estate and the subsequent impact on waiting times for criminal cases. This is the subject of ongoing discussion at the Hertfordshire Criminal Justice Board, chaired by the PCC, and nationally as the PCC is criminal justice lead for the Associations of PCCs. The ability to effectively address the backlog sits at the national level and the plans to address the criminal case backlog do not yet assure the PCC that it will be reduced within acceptable timescales. The subsequent impact on victims and witnesses, as well as the prospect of being able to effectively conduct trials in some cases over two years after events took place, is a top priority for the PCC and OPCC.

The Police

Police sickness rates both physical and mental wellbeing

The Constabulary monitors sickness rates on a quarterly basis and uses average days lost per member of staff as the measure. The table below illustrates the rolling 12-month figures of average days lost per person for Officers and Staff across all three forces. This period also covers the Covid 19 Emergency. There has been an overall slight reduction in sickness for police officers.

Psychological illness continues to account for the highest proportion of time lost, 43% for Officers and 26% for staff.

Beds, Cambs & Herts Comparison: **Rolling 12 Months (July 2019 - June 2020)**

POLICE OFFICERS	Av. Days Lost Per Person	Direction of Travel
BEDS	11.1	
CAMBS	9.9	
HERTS	9.7	

POLICE STAFF	Av. Days Lost Per Person	Direction of Travel
BEDS	9.7	
CAMBS	11.7	
HERTS	11.2	

What are the actual operational Hertfordshire Police numbers, excluding those on sick or compassionate leave, now compared to pre-lockdown?

Further analysis of operational officer and PCSO sickness during the Covid 19 emergency (Mar20-Sept 20), shows a 2.5% reduction in sickness. Therefore, in real terms, there have been 2.5% more officers and PCSOs fit for duty and deployed operationally during this Covid period and very few on compassionate leave.

The total police officer headcount for Herts as at 30 Sept 2020 stood at 2,187, up 94 from 1 April 2020.

What is being done at a strategic and operational level to promote wellness?

A significant programme of work has been undertaken to provide extra support to officers and staff during the pandemic. There is in place a strategic lead for wellbeing who co-ordinates this programme and dedicated resource has been put in place to co-ordinate the activity of wellbeing champions (30) across the constabulary. These champions specifically support those suffering from anxiety and sadly, in some case, bereavement. Operational officers in particular have been afforded options for accommodation, at no cost to the constabulary, when there has been a need to self-isolate. Significant messaging including the 'Wellbeing Wednesday' article brings together corporate messaging and sign posting to support agencies. The Constabulary is working with MIND in Hertfordshire in a mentoring scheme to build resilience for first line supervisors and managers. A second programme of work, 'Tackling the Stigma of Mental Health,' launches in November. Specialist Trauma Risk psychologists continue to give support to those suffering from effects of serious trauma. This is known as the TRIM process. A business case has recently been approved for the recruitment of two wellbeing co-ordinators.

Has the precept provided the right number of operational officers and PCSOs to maintain the high standard and reputation of the force in Hertfordshire?

Despite the fall in crime, the Covid restrictions have required the constabulary to undertake significant new duties and there has been increased overtime incurred during the last seven months to meet increased demand. Additional demand has come from BLM and XR protests that have been seen around the county, and the PCC is working with the Chief Constable to address the difficult issues that arise when policing demonstrations. Recruitment continues, with 94 new officers starting in role during that period, and recruitment is on target for the financial year. The increase in income derived from the precept has enabled recruitment of sufficient officers for Hertfordshire and the standard of policing and reputation of the constabulary remains high.

Annual Police Survey – what are the Commissioner's thoughts on the learning outcomes from the pandemic in particular from the perspective of police officers and civilian staff about what it is like to work through the time of the virus?

Structured debriefs have been undertaken at various points during the Pandemic. This has provided learning, good practice and some general qualitative commentary.

The general consensus from operational frontline staff is that it has added additional complexity (wearing PPE/social distancing etc) to an already complex job. However, the clear message and policing style of approaching rule breakers using the 3 E's, Engage/Explain/Encourage before resulting to Enforcement has been a helpful guide for officers.

Many staff have been working regularly or exclusively from home. The ICT mobile provision and roll-out of packages such as MS Teams has enabled this, with most staff reporting good experiences in the reliability of ICT. It has enabled the Constabulary to continue to function and productivity, although challenging to measure, appears to have been maintained as a result and in some respects improved. Health and well-being has remained good as a result and will support the Constabulary adopting more agile working practices in the future.

Policing

What is the impact on social cohesion?

There have been positive examples of residents supporting their neighbours and communities, particularly during the lockdown period, including the Thursday evening Clap for Key Workers. During National Neighbourhood Watch Week in June, fundraising projects and other supportive initiatives across Hertfordshire were celebrated, and 250 nominations for 'Acts of Kindness' Awards were received. These 'Acts of Kindness Awards' were picked up by the Lord-Lieutenant of Hertfordshire, and 41 winners were nominated for the Hertfordshire Heroes' Awards aimed at those volunteering from the general public to make a significant contribution to their community during the time of the pandemic.

On the negative side, whilst the majority of Hertfordshire residents were compliant in support of the lockdown and subsequent Covid-19 restrictions, there have been incidents of tension between residents, particularly where a resident (or a member of staff in shops, pubs, restaurants, taxis etc) had challenged another resident for breaching rules, and that person had become abusive and, on several occasions, violent. There have also been numerous incidents of members of the public deliberately spitting at people (and officers) whilst claiming to have Coronavirus.

Another layer which has affected community cohesion during the pandemic (again both in negative and positive ways) has been the BLM movement and protests during the summer. There are various aspects to this, including the positive support from all communities for the BLM movement/protests as well as some negative response from others towards the protesters, and the 'Black Lives Matter' slogan, and in some cases such as Broxbourne the counter-protests by the Far-Right groups. The protests whilst supported by many, have raised tensions and anger in others due to the breach of Covid-19 social distancing regulations.

Has the role of Herts police in the ongoing pandemic become more challenging? Several examples would be helpful to hear in your response.

Initial response at the start of the pandemic suggests it was a challenging time for frontline officers and staff. Now, it is the case that most have adapted to the new normal.

Some challenges have related to the use of PPE and the difficulties this creates with communication and the ability to use it appropriately in all scenarios.

Repeated changes to COVID regulations and the allowable exemptions has caused has at times made it difficult for officers and the public to fully understand which regulations are applicable in what circumstances.

Whilst demand levels fell sharply during the initial lockdown, these returned to normal levels through the summer and have remained at those levels into the second wave of infections. This has brought added pressure as the enhanced COVID response is being delivered in addition to dealing with normal, rather than suppressed, levels of police demand.

How well has the Constabulary adapted to focusing more on health, well-being and safety as opposed to conventional crime fighting?

Throughout the pandemic the force has continued to deploy mental health triage cars to ensure the provision of immediate assistance to people in mental health crisis and avoid unnecessary hospital admissions. Mental Health awareness week resulted in significant messaging by the force online, including bespoke advice around Covid-19 related concerns. Recognising the impact the pandemic continues to have, the safeguarding team are working in conjunction with the Suicide Prevention Programme Board to take a multi-agency approach to suicide prevention.

Recognising the impact Covid-19 would have on young people, particularly those in local care provision, the Missing Person's Team worked with partners in HCC and the care sector to ensure those most at risk were identified and support measures put in place. The Missing Persons Team developed an escalation process to ensure young people understood the consequences of breaching lockdown. The result was a 27% reduction in missing from care reports during lock down.

The Halo (child exploitation team) have utilised their social media platforms to spread key messaging to young people as well as their parents, carers and professionals coming into contact with children to recognise the signs of exploitation. The risks of exploitation, particularly online, have risen due to Covid-19 so this awareness is essential to try and prevent young people becoming victims. This messaging has been shared with partners across HCC.

With a decline, at least in the short term, in some types of recorded crime, how far has any effort been made to do more about cybercrime, particularly in terms of prevention?

At the beginning of lockdown at the end of March crime fell significantly, by 26%. From the middle of April, it began to increase again and by the middle of July reached normal levels, where it has continued since. The constabulary's focus has therefore been on adapting to the increased demand caused by the continuing Covid-related restrictions. This increase in demand is currently being met by use of overtime, which has been funded by the Home Office.

Hertfordshire Constabulary has a dedicated prevent and protect officer for cybercrime related offending. This officer engages with individuals who have been identified as vulnerable to becoming involved in criminality. Referral packages are received from the National Crime Agency and the officer engages with the offender and takes appropriate action. A lot of prevent work is done at schools and colleges and the cyber security challenge was circulated in May. Appropriate prevention messaging continues to be circulated. In addition, the On-line Child Protection Team continue to work in identifying and arresting offenders throughout the Covid 19 period.

The extension of the Cyber Basics Review scheme, which offers small and medium sized businesses a free security check by an IT professional. Run jointly with Hertfordshire Trading Standards, it will run again after the pilot reported none of the 100 companies which have taken part so far have been successfully targeted since joining up. The Constabulary is also in discussion with regional forces about the creation of a regional Cyber Resilience Centre to offer cyber security advice to SMEs.

The Beacon Fraud Hub has been shortlisted for Outstanding Customer Service in the Tackling Economic Crime Awards. Created last year by the Commissioner, the Hub ensures every fraud victim in Hertfordshire is offered support and advice. The unit has contacted 8,000 fraud victims, and in the process have helped them recover £300,000.

Communication/Public Perception

How far has this change of focus led to the development of different types of communication and interaction with the public – that is, with greater use of digital technology and more socially distanced types of interaction?

In addition to the increase in the use of the digitised survey tool ECHO, the Force Contact Centre has seen a rise in both on-line recording of crime and the use of 'webchat' to talk through incidents of crime.

Webchats now number 120 a day, up 65% on last year.

Speed of answering calls has also increased this year, with 88% 999s answered within 10s and 72% 101 calls within 30s.

What feedback has been received from the public in relation to how they feel the police within Hertfordshire have dealt with ongoing day to day policing in general and more specific to the pandemic?

During lockdown it was vital that engagement with members of the community was prioritised to understand what they needed from policing during very challenging times. With face to face engagement events such as neighbourhood surgeries and street meets being cancelled or postponed during the lockdown period, ECHO was used extensively by local policing teams. The number of feedback items received into ECHO increased. In the Force Control Room where ECHO is live 365 days a year, feedback increased throughout lockdown, peaking at an increase of 19.3% in May and 18.3% in June. A similar pattern was seen with community feedback, demonstrating empathy and appreciation to the police, whilst highlighting issues of concern. Most messages were very positive, many thanking the police for hard work and asking them to stay safe. A few were negative, referring to officers social distancing and some confusion as to the guidelines, especially as lockdown was lifted.

During the start of the lockdown, enforcement was a key topic that communities felt was most important. Speeding, groups, groups of youths and the virus in general were all key topics. Drugs and drug dealing were also highlighted and quite a lot of intelligence was given in lockdown where dealing and dealers were much more visible to the public. Overall, there was a feeling that the public wanted to help the police by letting them know what was happening in their communities.

The Crime Survey of England and Wales just published says:

Public perceptions of police and their response to the coronavirus pandemic remained largely positive

Across the three interview months, more than two-thirds of adults gave the police a positive rating for the work they were doing in their local area, with around half saying they were doing a good job (between 49% and 50%) and one-fifth saying they were doing an excellent job (between 20% and 21%). This compared with 4% to 6% of adults who said that the police were doing a poor or very poor job.

In addition, between 90% and 92% of adults were satisfied with the way local police were responding to the coronavirus pandemic (fairly satisfied, 63% to 67%; very satisfied, 25% to 28%).