

TITLE OF REPORT: Impact of COVID on Community Safety – Update

REPORT OF: Chief Inspector Dan Whyte
Northumbria Police – Central Area Command

Summary

This report provides Communities and Place Overview and Scrutiny Committee (OSC) with an overview of how the COVID-19 pandemic has impacted on crime, disorder and community safety issues within Gateshead.

1 Introduction

1.1 This report provides a summary of the emerging community safety issues that have been identified in Gateshead throughout the COVID-19 pandemic period. It also considers community tensions, concerns and potential community safety risks that are likely to emerge within the Borough as restrictions ease.

2 Background

2.1 There have been significant reductions in the number of crimes reported in Gateshead throughout 2020/21. At the end of January 2021, crime was down by 10% (-1,595 crimes), when compared to same period of the previous year. Reductions are pronounced in Gateshead Town Centre and locations linked to restrictions around shops, bars, restaurants and other venues.

2.2 Recorded crime figures for April through to January 2021 show **reductions** in most major crime types – including:

- Sexual offences – down 26% (150 fewer crimes)
- Vehicle crime – down 13% (164 fewer crimes)
- Criminal damage – down 6% (154 fewer crimes)
- Burglaries – down 14% (132 fewer crimes)
- Theft and handling offences – down 33% (1,146 fewer offences)
- Shoplifting – down 47% (727 fewer offences)

Slight volume **increases** have been noted in certain crime types – including:

- Violence against the person – up 2% (+159 crimes)
 - Most serious violence against the person – up 14% (+13 crimes)
 - Violence against the person without injury – up 4% (+137 crimes)
- Possession of weapons – up 8% (+11 crimes)
- Theft of pedal cycles – up 32% (+41 crimes)

2.3 It is important to recognise that other local authority areas are experiencing similar trends to Gateshead. The fluctuations in crime and ASB follow a similar pattern to Northumbria-wide trends and are also akin to that experienced by our Most Similar Family Groupings cohort. A full breakdown of the performance for all crime categories has been included within the Appendix.

- 2.4 Demand-related calls to Northumbria Police are almost 9% lower than the same period in 2019 with the highest reductions associated with a fall in the number of emergency 999 calls; albeit, demand relating to public safety issues (such as mental health, suicides and substances has increased). Conversely, we know that local authorities are seeing a significant increase in demand for services – particularly from those individuals experiencing multiple and complex needs, as well as enforcement and public health-related advice.
- 2.5 Northumbria Police have experienced a significant increase in the levels of anti-social behaviour (rising by more than 50% on last year); albeit, these calls also include all COVID-related incidents. Non-COVID related ASB levels have risen by 13% across the Force area compared to last year with increases noted in youth-related ASB and motorcycle disorder.
- 2.6 Feelings of safety and perceptions of how Councils and partners work together to tackle community safety issues remains positive. Public confidence surveys have shown local people are satisfied with how Police and Council are working together to tackle issues during COVID with increased numbers of people who feel enforcement is being taken seriously. In addition, the number of surveyed people reporting positive perceptions of Police visibility in their community has also increased in recent months.
- 2.7 Community tensions have changed and been impacted by people's response to Covid-19 restrictions. During the initial lockdown period in early 2020 – Gateshead did experience a spike in hate-related incidents; albeit, these levels have since reduced to pre-lockdown levels – and remain comparable to that found in other areas. Protests around BLM and counter protests by far-right activists did not necessarily affect Gateshead; however, we have experienced increased racist and offensive stickering within our area including widespread leafleting from Patriotic Alternative. Analysis of COVID-related incidents has shown higher number of calls reporting non-compliance with regulations linked with Muslim, Jewish and student populations across Northumbria. There have been no significant tensions reported in Gateshead relating to anti-vaccine or anti-COVID issues.
- 2.8 There have been a total of 22 x Preventing Violent Extremism referrals in Gateshead since January 2020 and we have continued to successfully manage several high-risk cases through the statutory multi-agency Channel Panel process in Gateshead (to prevent vulnerable persons from being drawn into terrorism). All referrals received have been linked with far right and/or mixed or unclear ideologies – and this is an increase on the number of referrals received in 2019. Further work continues to ensure that all available support is in place to mitigate the risk within Gateshead.
- 2.9 There continues to be a robust enforcement approach to dealing with breach of COVID regulations with strong partnership links being forged between Business Compliance and Northumbria Police COVID Taskforce. Northumbria Police has issued one of the highest volumes of FPNs throughout the country and take a robust stance to enforcement.

2.10 A review of the neighbourhood locations in which crime and ASB incidents have been committed during the last 12 months has shown more than half of all crimes takes place in neighbourhoods that are classified as being Extremely or Very Vulnerable under Thrive agenda. Northumbria Police, in conjunction with Community Safety and other Council services, will consider these locations as part of the weekly Operational Planning Group in Gateshead.

Crime	Vulnerable - Extremely	Vulnerable - Very	Just Coping - Only Just	Just Coping - Getting By	Managing	Thriving
2019/20	22.97%	27.26%	14.39%	15.05%	10.72%	9.61%
2020/21	25.25%	26.44%	14.90%	14.59%	9.98%	8.84%

There have been increased anti-social behaviour complaints in neighbourhoods that are deemed to be Thriving and Managing areas under Thrive agenda (with many complaints relating to potential tolerance-related issues such as nuisance noise, young people gathering in street/parks as well as reporting breaches of COVID regulations etc).

ASB	Vulnerable - Extremely	Vulnerable - Very	Just Coping - Only Just	Just Coping - Getting By	Managing	Thriving
2019/20	24.20%	28.84%	14.98%	15.06%	9.18%	7.73%
2020/21	23.31%	27.26%	14.58%	15.67%	10.17%	9.01%

4 Key risks and implications:

4.1 Once the lockdown measures are relaxed and public start to experience further freedoms, we are likely to see an increase in crime and community safety issue taking place within Gateshead. Some of the potential/expected issues we may expect to see in the coming months may include:

Crime

- Increases in crime and disorder (which imposes economic costs, reinforces social exclusion and generates environmental decline of neighbourhoods).
- Increase in opportunist crimes particularly as we enter lighter nights period, which are peak months for theft offences, burglaries, ASB and deliberate secondary fires.
- Fear/perception of feeling safe outside the home (as victims of crime or a fear around social distancing) – which can make people reluctant to engage within local communities, restrict/limit use of public transport or travel.
- Fear of crime can also be a cause of mental distress and social exclusion. Women and older people tend to worry more about becoming victims and this may prevent them from engaging in social activities.
- Evidence shows lack of strong community increases risk of further crime, disorder, tensions and poor community cohesion.
- People who suffer from poor health are more likely to be victims of crime than those in good health; harm hotspot locations with higher levels of inequality such as unemployment, residential turnover and lower education may experience higher rates of crime and disorder – particularly violence.
- Demand and scarcity of some goods and services may lend itself to social acceptance of organised criminality and increases in loansharking.

- Increase online presence will facilitate further cyber-enabled crimes, fraud offences and counter-fitting all likely to increase.
- Pressure on our ability to maintain current operating practices (particularly those services operating under short-term funding) and how this reflects on current demand.
- Significant backlogs at Court has the potential to impact negatively on wider public confidence on Criminal Justice System and lead to fewer convictions.

Changes in drug supply

- The current drug supply market has been relatively stable with access to range of products; albeit, with some price increases. We have continued to carry out targeted operations to disrupt supply; however, the market is likely to re-introduce itself (with a greater focus on targeting groups to sell illicit substances – which may include vulnerable people such as rough sleepers or those in temporary accommodation, as well as young people).
- Financial insecurity can have a direct impact on people being more likely to change substance use or deal drugs (at low level). There is the possibility of changes in patterns or types of offending to source money for drugs.
- Changes to drug supply with greater emphasis around county lines and exploitation of vulnerable persons (e.g. sex-work, brothels, cuckooing, pop-up parties etc.).

Alcohol

- Treatment services are already seeing a rise in the number of referrals and this will likely continue to increase into the future.
- We are seeing evidence that loss of community-based support networks is a factor in increased alcohol consumption – and there is anecdotal evidence that domestic abuse victims are also drinking more/at harmful levels to cope with their situation.

Violence Against Women and Girls

- We anticipate that demand for services/supports across both domestic and sexual violence service will increase significantly – and will be exacerbated when children return to school and make further disclosures about their experiences while at home.
- Services have noted an increase in severity of abuse and heightened risk of coercive control within relationships which will make it harder to victims and their children.
- As disclosures increase, there is a potential for a rise in number of domestic abuse survivors that may require access to suitable safe accommodation and trauma-informed services such as counselling, mental health and drug and alcohol provisions.

Anti-Social Behaviour (ASB)

- We expect that as lockdown measures are eased – there will be a rise in youth-related ASB. It is likely neighbour disputes will return to more typical levels found pre-lockdown; although the local restrictions relating to limiting housing mixing, re-opening of licensed premises and other social venues will change the nature of the ASB complaints received – particularly, alcohol related issues.

- Continued issues around ASB taking place in public/green spaces – linked with perceptions of crime and social distancing.
- Further increases in the complexity of cases linked with substance misuse, mental health and lack of community/support networks.
- Increase in online reporting. Expectations of services to respond to a range of ASB issues; particularly if current resources are already stretched leading to potential perception and public confidence issues.
- Increased footfall in Gateshead Town Centre and other high street areas will lend itself to increased ASB, shoplifting and public order including begging.

Criminal Exploitation and Serious Violence

- Expectation criminal exploitation and serious violence increase as lockdown eases more widely with disproportionate impact on vulnerable communities and people (particularly associated with mental health, drugs and alcohol).
- Increase in demand for serious violence related issues as lockdown ends – potentially linked with re-introduction of Night-Time Economy and mixing.

Hate Crime

- Potential for ongoing increases in xenophobic and racist attitudes and associated hate crimes – particularly online – and heightened by various national, regional and local contexts (e.g. increase in migrants using hotels, Covid conspiracy theories, impact of Brexit etc.).
- Economic and social issues may generated discontent and resentment within communities – generating further hate crime, tensions and Preventing Violent Extremism referrals.
- Fewer opportunities to disclose hate and maye crime (e.g. safe spaces, lack of community-based support etc.) means these crimes may go unreported or victims do not seek necessary support or help.

Prevent

- Increase online presence/interactions throughout lockdown has created the potential for vulnerable persons to have significant exposure to the risk of radicalisation. Increased conspiracy issues (e.g. COVID linked with 5G and Jewish community) has the potential to generate further radicalisation.
- Increases in hateful extremism and potential for right-wing activity within area as identified as a concern within the Counter Terrorism Local Profile – fueled by discontent and resentment (e.g.economic and social issues).

Further Restrictions

- Return to localised restrictions has the potential to exacerbate community safety issues, social cohesion and widen inequalities – leading to increased pressure on the capability of services/partners to be able to respond and a loss of confidence in public services and government;
- Longer-term restrictions may result in further community tensions through a perceived sense of inequality and unfairness – and have a greater impact on vulnerable and minority groups and young people.
- Potential for further impact events placing additional pressure (e.g. severe weather event, winter pressures, major incidents, national and legislative announcements).

5 Next Steps

- 5.1 Northumbria Police will continue to work with Community Safety partners to monitor incidents, issues and trends over the coming months and will report any notable shifts which may contribute to a spike in crime, anti-social behaviour or a change in community tensions. We maintain contact with local communities and networks to ensure we have up to date knowledge and information about what is going on within the Borough to inform our work and the work of our partners.

6 Recommendations

- 6.1 Members are asked to:
- (i) Comment on the report
 - (ii) Agree to receive further updates at future meetings.
 - (iii) Identify any issues/areas OSC may want to scrutinise in greater detail at a future Committee meeting.

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* Appendix 1 – Crime Performance Table

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* received from Corporate Development Department at Northumbria Police

1 April 2020 to 31 January 2021

Gateshead	2020-21	2019-20	Change compared to 2019/20 average	
Total crime	15,180	16,775	-1,595	- 10%
Violence against the person	5,560	5,401	+ 159	+ 3%
Violence against the person - With injury	1,544	1,522	+ 22	+ 1%
Most serious violence against the person	108	95	+ 13	+ 14%
Less serious violence against the person	1,436	1,427	+ 9	+ 1%
Violence against the person - Without injury	4,016	3,879	+ 137	+ 4%
Robbery	77	77	+ 0	+ 0%
Sexual offences	428	578	- 150	- 26%
Vehicle crime	1,065	1,229	- 164	- 13%
Vehicle interference	243	178	+ 65	+ 37%
TFMV	640	761	- 121	- 16%
TWOC	182	290	- 108	- 37%
Criminal damage	2,353	2,507	- 154	- 6%
Burglary	804	936	- 132	- 14%
Burglary dwelling	558	627	- 69	- 11%
Burglary OTD	246	309	- 63	- 20%
Theft and handling	2,297	3,443	-1,146	- 33%
Shoplifting	809	1,536	- 727	- 47%
Theft from the person	86	126	- 40	- 32%
Theft of a pedal cycle	171	130	+ 41	+ 32%
Other theft and handling	1,231	1,651	- 420	- 25%
Drug crime	358	352	+ 6	+ 2%
Fraud and forgery	15	35	- 20	- 57%
Public disorder	1,950	2,006	- 56	- 3%
Miscellaneous crime	273	211	+ 62	+ 29%
Possessions of weapons	149	138	+ 11	+ 8%