



POLICE AND CRIME PANEL

11th August 2020

POLICE AND CRIME COMMISSIONER REPORT

AUGUST 2020

A lot has changed since the last time the panel met, but I want to set out in this report how my office's commitment to fighting and preventing crime has not lessened. We have faced short to medium term challenges of an unprecedented nature, as well as the longer term risk now facing our region. I will go over those in this report, but first I want to put on record my thanks to the police officers and staff who demonstrate on a daily basis their dedication to keeping us safe. They have worked with the public to help reduce the spread of this deadly virus, and my thanks go out to them.

1) Preventing Crime

Violence Reduction Unit

The second phase of my Violence Reduction Unit is now underway. Phase 2 of the Northumbria VRU will run until end of March 2021, and my team will focus on four priority areas: connecting communities, reduce offending, working with families and youth diversion.

Even in the short timescale that the unit has been in operation, the landscape has changed drastically and we must respond to that. We are confident that through these four areas, along with our delivery partners, we can support our communities and respond to any spike in crime.

Along with the launch of this phase of work, I am conducting a regional consultation with young people aged 14-25 that is seeking their views on lockdown, the impact of it, and what services may be required to support them as they transition back to school later in the year, I will update the panel on my learning from this at a future meeting.

Serious violent crime is currently at the lowest level across Northumbria since before 2018, and whilst lockdown has clearly contributed to this, it had been reducing prior to the measures being implemented.

My worry now is that young people will suffer the brunt of the economic fallout from the pandemic, and that their long-term opportunities may be impacted on as a result.

Since the last police and crime panel the IPPR think tank has warned that that the number of unemployed young people in the UK is set to become the highest on record. Unemployment goes hand in hand with high crime rates, and while organisations regionally need to do everything possible to support young people and ensure they have opportunities, the Government needs to act fast and address the bigger picture as part of its upcoming spending review.

That includes the need for the Government to give VRUs longterm funding certainty. We cannot continue with the ad-hoc funding nature that sees these units handed one-off annual funds on the whim of a minister.

The first quarter of Phase 2 has been a useful reminder of just why we need VRUs.

In youth diversion projects, for example, giving young people at risk of crime an alternative, the team is currently working with 67 young people, despite Covid-19, using one to one mentoring of those who could well be tempted to carry a knife or use violence on others.

Of those 67, the Foundation of Light is helping 21 and the Newcastle United Foundation 46.

Our reducing offending stream is another great example of where work has been ongoing despite the impact of the Coronavirus. Last month I took part in a socially distanced visit to the team at Junction 42, in Newcastle. I'm funding this charity to work with 30 ex-offenders on a 1:1 basis to improve health, well-being, training and employability needs. A good job is the best tool our region has in the fight against crime, and it's great to see work ongoing here.

With many visits to key projects cancelled, I have hosted monthly calls that have brought projects together to understand the new challenges faced, how organisations have redeployed their services to support the changing needs of their communities and how we can work as a region to support one another.

Through these sessions we have been able to engage a large number of partners, speak directly to service users and young people, and help plan our response for the post-lockdown period – it has been fantastic to see the direct impact we have been able to make through our emergency funding in these challenging times.

2) Fighting Crime

Recruitment

I am pleased to say we have more than 200 new officers in uniform since the start of the Coronavirus lockdown.

Last month myself and the Chief Constable welcomed the latest of these, 52 student officers, into the Force. Their arrival means a total of 217 new recruits have joined since lockdown was announced on March 23, as part of the ongoing recruitment campaign to increase the number of officers across the area.

Due to Coronavirus, special measures have been put in place to allow training to go-ahead, with an increased emphasis on digital and virtual learning. The latest recruits have joined the Graduate Initial Police Learning & Development Programme. This is a bespoke two-year programme, open to student officers who already hold a degree and will be focusing their development in an investigative role whilst working towards the Level 3 Policing Diploma.

Our police officer numbers are growing and growing and the more we have in their uniforms out on our streets, the better. This is what people want to see, especially when the Force has been hit hard by a decade of austerity. We are doing everything in our power to invest and build the force back up – to make people feel safe and keep crime down.

Tackling burglary

Northumbria Police has a great track record on tackling burglary and neighbourhood crime, and the force continues to prioritise this. It was disappointing then to see the Home Office refuse to back our crime reduction plans in a recent funding bid. None of the Government's £25m Safer Streets fund was awarded to Northumbria in the recent bidding process. My office worked with the force and Sunderland City Council on a bid for more than £800,000 in burglary prevention funding, including a primary bid to support households in Hendon and a

secondary bid covering the New Town area of Houghton. This funding would have paid for CCTV, anti-burglary kits and lane gates among other preventative measures.

I am awaiting further feedback on the bid from the Home Office but informal feedback so far indicates the Home Office did not wish to support the hiring of a Community Development worker designed to bring about long-term changes in crime rates. I fundamentally disagree with any Government minister who says you can solve crime just with physical infrastructure. Our neighbourhoods need trained professionals supporting them, including police officers, police staff and council officers on the ground helping out.

3) Improving Lives

Over the last few months many visits to partner organisations, support services and community groups, planned prior to Covid-19, have had to be pushed back in accordance with safety regulations. Despite this, the office has continually been in dialogue with these key contacts, providing support where we can. Although the face-to-face meets have been unable to take place, our digital communications have certainly filled the gap.

We've brought organisations together on Zoom calls, for example, we've hosted online meetings with domestic abuse support services from across the region. This was to ensure a collective response to the impact of the virus and pull together a campaign to encourage bystanders of domestic abuse to report concerns. We've also focused our efforts on ensuring local charity organisations have been able to continue their vital work during the pandemic, or if not possible, help make sure they're in a position to safely re-open with the easing of restrictions. Central to this has been our Coronavirus Response Fund. I wanted to set up this fund to allow organisations to increase their capacity during this time of great need, or help them to reach out to people offering support in innovative new ways. Funding has largely helped resource a shift to online chat and support services to allow organisations to keep as connected as possible with those who are isolated and vulnerable. From helping organisations like Streetwise in Newcastle provide PPE to all young people attending their programme of summer activities to supporting the work of Key Project in South Tyneside, which has acquired new properties to help homeless people and families at breaking point, we've been pleased to make a positive difference where we can.

With the easing of restrictions and the gradual return to a new sense of normal, visits where safe to do so are beginning to resume. I'm looking forward to seeing first-hand some of the excellent work that's been happening, the resilience that's been shown throughout our region and discussing plans to see us through this important time of recovery and how my office and the Violence Reduction Unit can help.

Protecting Places of Worship

In June 2020, I responded to a Home Office public consultation to provide insight into key issues affecting faith communities and their places of worship. I encouraged members of my 'faith' advisory panel and local faith groups to respond with their thoughts.

Tackling hate crime is of vital importance so I welcomed the opportunity to examine our current provision across Northumbria, how well it's working and how we can best enhance that protection in the future. I am committed to working with Northumbria Police to make sure faith communities feel heard and have the confidence to report any incidents of hate crime, particularly those that target places of worship.

Over the past five years there has been an increase in religious hate crime in Northumbria, specifically targeting Muslim and Jewish communities and this mirrors the picture nationally. Whilst it is acknowledged that hate crime is often underreported, I believe there has been a significant improvement in how Northumbria Police record hate crime and a better understanding among officers about what constitutes a hate crime and the additional support that can be provided to victims of such crimes.

Independent Sexual Violence Advisors

In January 2020 the Ministry of Justice wrote to Police and Crime Commissioners to inform them that an additional £1 million will be invested in recruiting Independent Sexual Violence Advisors. I'm delighted to say that we received notification in July 2020 that we were successful in our bid for £70,193 to fund a LGBTQ+ specialist advisor until March 2022. This new post will sit within Victims First Northumbria, adding capacity to the existing sexual violence advisors team, as well as taking a lead on supporting LGBTQ+ identifying clients who may face additional barriers to accessing support.

Independent Custody Visitors

Our Independent Custody Visitors play an important role in ensuring that those detained in Northumbria Police custody are well looked after with their rights and entitlements upheld. Detainees are visited in person, and during the ongoing Covid-19 pandemic we have adapted our way of working to ensure monitoring and scrutiny could continue safely.

I want to thank two volunteers who during this time have attended Forth Banks custody suite on a fortnightly basis to undertake custody record checks. These checks are not held face-to-face and take place outside of the custody suite to reduce any virus-related risks.

The custody visitors are provided with a questionnaire produced by the Independent Custody Visiting Association which allows visitors to check on the welfare and rights detainees receive. This includes the provision of PPE, Covid arrangements in custody and access to healthcare. In addition I receive a regular update to my Scrutiny meeting in respect of custody from Northumbria Police.

In a recent visit the custody visitors highlighted the time taken for a local authority to provide an appropriate adult for a youth detained in custody. Northumbria Police has held a meeting with all local authority youth leads to try and address time issues and ensure juvenile detainees are only held in custody for the minimal amount of time. A decision on whether to resume custody visiting in person will be made in the coming weeks to ensure the safety of our volunteers.

4) Upcoming issues

Developing the Coronavirus response

Our region continues to adapt to the changes presented by the pandemic and the return to a "new normal", and I have continued to support those efforts and the work of our police force.

The force continues with its new operating model, and is well positioned to respond to further changes through the recovery phase. Remote, agile and home-working approaches have been enhanced or introduced where possible for police staff.

Since the last Police and Crime Panel the night-time economy has returned to the north east as bars and pubs reopen, and clearly this will have a gradual impact on crime levels as

people head to city and town centres on an evening. Many other regular features of daily life are returning, albeit in a socially distanced way, and it is clear that the reduction we have seen in some areas will slowly change.

Another aspect of the new normal we need to prepare for is the impact of tourism across our region, especially in Northumberland.

It is likely we will see an increase in domestic tourism over the coming 12 months, with people much more likely to spend their holidays in the UK. The North East has a vast amount to offer tourists, and I suspect we will become even more popular, with some of our Northumberland beaches, the UK's hidden gems in many cases, becoming busier. I am confident this will be growth that happens in a responsible fashion, but it is worth mentioning that this will put extra pressure in local resources.

For example, as well as its own unique offering, Northumberland is also a major access route to Scotland, and any increase in tourism either to our region or north of the border will likely lead to significant pressure on the road network, where much of the A1 is a single carriageway.

Again, I do not see this as a major crime issue, we are a region that proudly welcomes tourists, but it will present a resource management issue which I am confident the force will be planning for.

Supporting victims of domestic abuse

The Coronavirus pandemic has had a huge impact on victims across Northumbria, especially victims of domestic abuse. Recognising the need to provide additional support to these victims we successfully secured funding from the Home Office and the Ministry of Justice to commission specialist services to help them cater for increased victim needs.

We successfully bid for and received £120,000 from the Home Office Children Affected by Domestic Abuse fund to help six currently commissioned organisations continue providing vital support for children and young people who have been impacted by domestic abuse during the Covid-19 pandemic. As the pandemic has required organisations to adapt the way they work and has led to an increase in domestic abuse, this fund is about providing organisations with the resources they need to carry out their services in a socially distant way and to ensure they have enough staffing capacity to meet demand.

We successfully bid for and received £499,687 from the MOJ Covid-19 Extraordinary Funding to help 28 new and currently commissioned services that provide vital support to victims and survivors of domestic and sexual violence to continue to ensure that their services are readily available and safely accessible during the current pandemic.

Review of PCCs

Last month the Home Office announced a review into the role of Police and Crime Commissioners. The review does not propose ending the roles or reducing the number of police forces in England and Wales.

The review will be carried out in two parts, before and after next year's PCC elections.

Part one will report to the Home Secretary by October 2020 and will be focussed on changes required to strengthen the model which, where possible, can be delivered ahead of the 2021 PCC elections.

In particular, it will: consider how to strengthen the accountability, resilience, legitimacy and scrutiny mechanisms of the existing model to drive up standards; identify and share best practice across the sector; and examine the effectiveness of the relationship between PCCs and Chief Constables and the checks and balances currently in place.

The Government has said it will also use part one of the review to help us map out our longer-term ambition for the expansion of the PCC role.

In relation to Fire and Rescue Services, the Government has said that further reform of these services is required in order to respond to the recommendations from Phase 1 of the Grenfell Tower Inquiry and to build on the findings from Sir Tom Winsor's State of Fire and Rescue Report. The review will consider further options and opportunities to strengthen fire governance and accountability, drawing on the lessons from the first cycle of fire governance transfers to PCCs. These Fire Authority changes are not proposed by my office, and I personally think the current oversight arrangements in Northumberland and Tyne and Wear are well established and provide a good service. But the Government has clearly indicated it is prepared to make the changes in line with its own priorities.

Part two of the review will commence after the 2021 elections and will allow the Government to consider further ways to strengthen and expand the role of PCCs, including the role PCCs play in tackling re-offending to help reduce crime. It will focus on longer-term reforms and the potential for wider efficiencies to be made within the system with a view to implementation ahead of the 2024 elections.

Keeping in contact:

I have committed to keeping partners and constituents updated about by work by producing a monthly newsletter. This will be emailed to people and uploaded on my website. It is always good to hear your thoughts at panel meetings, if you would like to contact me between panel meetings, I can be contacted the following ways –

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