

22nd May 2019

The Rt Honourable Sajid Javid MP
Home Secretary
2 Marsham Street
London SW1P 4DF

Dear Home Secretary

RESPONSE TO 'FRAUD: TIME TO CHOOSE' PUBLISHED ON 2 APRIL 2019

The report highlights the shortcomings in Action Fraud and in policing practices that will have adversely affected public confidence and failed to offer a satisfactory service to the majority of victims. I acknowledge that this is the crime most local people are likely to become a victim of, and it is for this reason that I have indicated in my refreshed Police and Crime Plan (2019-21) that fraud should be regarded as a local priority in addition to knife crime, burglary, drugs, anti-social behaviour and road safety.

I am particularly concerned about Action Fraud's difficulties in managing the demand related to reporting fraud offences. I understand the need to improve the awareness among local people of how to report these crimes, but I feel uncomfortable encouraging reporting through this channel while the organisation is struggling to offer an adequate response. I sympathise with the challenge: Avon and Somerset has previously experienced and overcome the challenges in responding to high demand on its call centre; however, if Action Fraud's call abandonment rate is currently showing no improvement on the 37% it experienced over the year (April 2017- March 2018), it will not offer victims an acceptable level of service when reporting offences.

Equally concerning is the finding that some forces were found to be filing crimes where there were lines of enquiry in an attempt to reduce demand. The need to prioritise is a reality in policing, experienced across all forces. Management of demand is a significant challenge for all, but it is imperative that the appropriate response is given and that is not to suppress demand. I can assure the Home Secretary, the Inspectorate and local people that this is not an approach taken within Avon and Somerset: all referrals are allocated for investigation. However, as fraud is primarily allocated based on suspect (not victim) location, I cannot say with certainty that no local people within the Force area have been impacted by this.

The recommendations applicable for the Chief Constable are noted as:

- Ensuring processes are in place to accurately and efficiently report fraud outcomes to the National Fraud Intelligence Bureau (NFIB);

- Publishing the Constabulary's policy for responding to and investigating allegations of fraud.

Additionally the areas for improvement are noted as:

- Improving the way the Constabulary uses the NFIB monthly victim lists to identify and support vulnerable victims and others who require additional support;
- Ensure the Constabulary improves the identification and mapping of organised crime groups in which the principal criminality is fraud;
- Ensure that fraudsters are included among those considered for serious organised crime 'prevent' tactics, including by local strategic partnership boards and through integrated offender management processes;
- Increase their forces' use of ancillary orders against fraudsters; and
- Ensure that their force complies with the Code of Practice for Victims of Crime when investigating fraud.

In response to the recommendations, I can confirm that all fraud outcomes are reported to NFIB by the Constabulary. The Constabulary is currently developing a specific policy for responding to and investigating allegations of fraud (previously would have been covered under a general allocation policy). Business leads are engaging on a national and regional basis to ensure consistency of approach and the policy is due to be finalised by the end of September.

The Constabulary's Economic Crime Team (ECT) review all fraud received in the force area – via a call for service or from referrals from the NFIB – and add advice, assistance or guidance where appropriate to officers that are investigating fraud offences. Monthly fraud surgeries are held on each local policing area by the ECT to give advice and assist with investigation strategies for fraud offences in line with the fraud investigation model. This process has been reviewed and all fraud is now initially assessed by the ECT to ensure correct allocation and appropriate investigation parameters are set. This approach also allows an overview of fraud in the force area. National Police Transformation Funding has been made available to train further officers in the Investigations teams in the specialist fraud investigators programme and the fraud management course which will enable a higher proportion of fraud offences to be investigated by investigators who have been trained in the fraud investigation model.

The Constabulary has been following the Operation Signature safeguarding process for vulnerable victims of fraud (VVF) since November 2017. Approximately 650 fraud victims living in the Avon and Somerset area are identified each month by Action Fraud. The VVF process identifies the most vulnerable of these (10 to 20 per month) who receive a home visit by a uniformed neighbourhood officer as this has been shown to be the most effective means of breaking the fraud cycle. The visiting officer will aim to implement protective measures, arrange follow-up visits or signpost to support agencies and information. Fraud vulnerability does not just relate to the elderly but affects all ages: those who are isolated,

bereaved, suffering mental health issues, repeat victims, those sold on in lists as previous victims of frauds and people suffering domestic financial control.

Vulnerable victims of fraud are also identified when initially calling in to the Constabulary to report a crime. A number of vulnerable victims of fraud are identified through sensitive intelligence shared by the financial sector and in these cases, the victim is often not aware that they are a victim of fraud. These individuals receive a personal visit from a member of the Financial Investigation Unit (FIU) to provide fraud prevention advice and awareness specifically in relation to sending money abroad. Safeguarding opportunities are followed up through appropriate referrals. Digital Media Investigators are utilised to produce information to share with victims in order to help them see that their friend / partner / investment is not genuine.

The Constabulary are currently looking at ways to extend its reach outside of the most vulnerable and, as part of this, are exploring opportunities around using volunteers in this area.

Resourcing challenges continue to exist with significant investigative and intelligence gaps hampering understanding the true extent of Fraud offences, any Organised Crime Group involvement and effective management of the issue. The threat has been scored by Intelligence as equivalent to that of knife crime. However, resonating with the conclusions of the HMICFRS report, addressing intelligence gaps in this area is a medium rather than a high priority because of the levels of associated harm being lower than other threats.

The Constabulary does map OCGs involved in fraud but the picture is often masked as fraud is not the predominant criminality. A national approach is needed to adequately map fraud OCGs that offend without any restrictions through geographic location.

As the mapping of OCGs progresses, the Constabulary will address the need to ensure that fraudsters are considered for serious organised crime 'prevent' tactics.

The Constabulary considers all potential ancillary orders against fraudsters where appropriate. I have invested in funding an additional financial investigator post to utilise the additional powers contained within the Criminal Finances Act 2017. Ensuring the force complies with the Code of Practice for Victims of Crime is regularly reviewed as part of the investigative process.

In conclusion, I acknowledge the issues contained within this report and feel that the Constabulary are taking steps to address recommendations that are applicable to them. I also recognise the work that has been carried out to ensure some of the reports' recommendations do not apply to this Constabulary and commend the efforts business leads, staff and officers are making to prevent victimisation, bring offenders to justice and support those who have been victims of fraud.



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This response is published on the OPCC website (<http://www.avonandsomerset-pcc.gov.uk/Openness/Audits-and-Inspections/Her-Majestys-Inspectorate-of-Constabulary.aspx>).

Regards

Sue Mountstevens

SUE MOUNTSTEVENS
Police and Crime Commissioner
for Avon & Somerset

cc. Wendy Williams, HMI
Chief Constable Andy Marsh, Avon & Somerset Constabulary

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📍 Avon and Somerset Police and Crime Commissioner, Valley Road, Portishead, Bristol. BS20 8JJ

☎ 01278 646 188 | 🐦 @aandspcc | 📘 aandspcc | ✉ pcc@avonandsomerset.pnn.police.uk | 🌐 avonandsomerset-pcc.gov.uk