

RESPONSE DATED 4TH SEPTEMBER 2020 TO ‘STATE OF POLICING – THE ANNUAL ASSESSMENT OF POLICING IN ENGLAND AND WALES 2019’ PUBLISHED BY HMICFRS ON 2ND JULY 2020

COVID-19

This report starts with a view of how policing, nationally, has responded to the COVID-19 emergency up until May. I agree that the response to this public health emergency is one of the biggest challenges faced by the Constabulary in recent years. I am also of the view that Avon and Somerset Constabulary responded extremely well to this challenge; doing what the police do best and dealing with a crisis.

Even prior to lockdown, in the middle of March, the Constabulary introduced a new system by which calls for service were triaged and dealt with differently: this was in anticipation of what may come such as expected higher demand and less resources.

In Avon and Somerset we had already invested in mobile technology so the Constabulary were swiftly able to move the relevant parts of their workforce to homeworking with minimal disruption. There was also a gold, silver bronze command structure initiated to respond to this emergency. A dedicated team, led by a Superintendent, was established to manage the home-working situation. This team primarily helped ensure two things: firstly that those home-working and/or self-isolating were supported and cared for by the organisation. Secondly this team also helped ensure that those working from home, especially those who could not carry out their regular duties, were tasked in a coordinated way that best supported the organisational workload and strategic priorities.

It is worth noting although, like other forces and organisations, the Constabulary were affected by people having to self-isolate actual sickness levels during this period were extremely low. I believe this is, in part, due to the Constabulary truly demonstrating its value of caring and looking after its workforce during this time.

One of the considerable policing challenges was the introduction of the emergency laws, on 26th March, to help enforce lockdown and other restrictions. This was rapidly developed legislation which the police were expected to respond to. UK policing is a model of policing by consent – as referenced in the third Peelian principle – and so appropriate enforcement of this new legislation was a challenge. The Constabulary responded extremely well to this and followed the National Police Chiefs’ Council’s guidance of “engage; explain; encourage; and, only if necessary, enforce.” In the vast majority of cases enforcement was not necessary as most of the public respected the new rules. One of the additional challenges surrounding this new legislation were the messages that had been coming from the Government which often confused the law and guidance and left both the public and the police with great ambiguity. The police of course could only enforce the law and not the guidelines.

The report highlights the inconsistency with which different forces approached this: this is evident when you look at the number of fixed penalty notices (FPNs) issued, under the legislation, by each force. As of July some forces had issued over 1000 FPNs whereas others issued under 100 (this did not necessarily correlate to population size either). Whether considering raw numbers of FPNs or numbers per head of population, Avon and Somerset Constabulary is in the middle of the table when looking at all English forces. Aside from the aforementioned confusion between law and guidelines there were also very differing views of the public in the role that the police should play in enforcing this or not; as was seen in the media. However through my community engagement I have found the vast majority of residents to have been supportive of the approach taken in Avon and Somerset. This is evidenced by the results of a survey of local residents that is conducted every quarter. In the quarter covering April, May and June 80% of residents agreed they had confidence in the police. When specifically asked about the handling of COVID-19 47% agreed it had actually increased their confidence in local police with only 10% saying it decreased their confidence (the remainder neither agreed or disagreed or didn't know).

Like other forces, in the early part of this emergency particularly, relevant personal protective equipment (PPE), such as masks, were not readily available. Despite this officers continued to police to the best of their ability and serve their communities putting risk to themselves aside.

Demand in Avon and Somerset also changed significantly with reductions in crime and other non-crime demand but huge amounts of demand created by people reporting and responding to breaches of the COVID-19 legislation. After the low month of April traditional demand has increased significantly again; but with some crime growing more than others. This complex and changing demand picture is recognised by the Constabulary and is feeding into their strategic planning.

I whole-heartedly agree with the assessment that other parts of the criminal justice service (CJS), aside from the police, needed reform as did the justice process as a whole. I have been trying to make inroads into this in Avon and Somerset but this is extremely challenging when CPS and courts are subject to national, not local, direction. The response to this emergency has led to a significantly reduced capacity in the courts resulting in ever increasing backlogs of cases for them to deal with. This ultimately means justice is not being done in many cases further exacerbating harm for victims. This problem needs national intervention to resolve and as deputy lead for CJS at the Association of PCCs I will be helping to drive this work forward.

Complex demand

This report highlights the very important point that demand on policing is often increased due to the reduction or gaps in other public services. A primary example of this being those with mental ill-health; in Avon and Somerset there was an eight percent annual increase in mental health related calls in 2019. In order to better understand how the Constabulary are dealing with people and incidents related to mental ill-health this will be one of the assurance themes scrutinised by me later in the year. I also welcome the planned joint inspection, next year, on this topic which will provide further insight and areas for improvement across partnership working.

Additional officers

Operation Uplift is a welcome change in direction for the funding of policing. With this significant increase in numbers the public and the Government rightly expect tangible benefits in terms of the service delivered. As I have written in my own reports, the benefits from this growth will not be instantly recognised and will take several years. Not only is the growth in headcount over three years there is of course the inexperience of new officers to consider. In Avon and Somerset the Futures Programme is responsible for leading and co-ordinating the recruitment, training and placement of new officers. I have been pleased with the recruitment, which has met the national targets and how the new Police Education Qualification Framework is being adopted to ensure their proper training. The Constabulary is still in the early stages of planning where to place the new officers in order to achieve maximum benefit to the public and deliver my Police and Crime Plan. This planning is very complex and has been all the more challenging with COVID-19 potentially changing demand in a longer term way.

Funding

I agree with both recommendations in the report relating to funding. Firstly a review of the funding formula is needed as I believe Avon and Somerset is relatively under-funded compared to some other forces. Secondly the short-term funding does impede new and longer-term investment, particularly in technology and so I also support the recommendation of a rolling three-year funding programme.

National police structure

In December 2019 I responded to the Strategic Review of Policing saying that I believed the current 43-force structure was in need of review citing some of these challenges discussed in this HMICFRS report. This reform is needed to help tackle the increasingly borderless nature of criminality, to bring greater consistency to policing nationally and assist with funding challenges. Prior to any larger reform I support the recommendation of a 'network code'.

Partnership working

Policing and other public services do need to work better together if there is to be any hope of reducing crime and re-offending in a significant way. Avon and Somerset is one of 18 forces to have received funding to establish Violence Reduction Units (VRUs). These VRUs are based on a public health model of multi-agency working and are now in the second year. I hope the formal evaluation of this second year will demonstrate the benefits of the approach we have experienced anecdotally. For the last two years I have employed somebody in my office with the remit of leading reducing re-offending work: this has brought partners together better than before with some new initiatives underway but there remain significant challenges. This Reducing Re-offending Board has also commissioned an independent review of Integrated Offender Management in Avon and Somerset.

Police collaborations

The report rightly highlights the challenges of multi-force collaboration and cites the disbandment of Tri-Force, a collaboration involving Avon and Somerset. A fundamental challenge will always be that each force and PCC must always put their own territorial area first as those are the communities to which they are duty bound to deliver the best service. The suggested incentivisation or direction of collaborations from the Government may be necessary to help overcome the current barriers to successful collaborations.

Evidence-based policing

Insight through data is something we are proud of in Avon and Somerset and has often been recognised as a strength for the Constabulary, as it is in this report. Problem solving is also one of the six pillars of neighbourhood policing in Avon and Somerset. Despite the success already achieved in this area I recognise there are still challenges and room for improvement and am pleased to see these areas continue to be central in the Constabulary's strategic planning.

Service to the public

This report recognises that the service delivered by policing does not necessarily meet the expectations of the public. I and the Chief Constable always strive to improve the service being offered but the reality is that it is constrained by resources not by ambition. The necessary prioritisation does mean focussing on the most vulnerable people and harmful crimes which naturally means the same level of service cannot be delivered to those less harmful, higher volume crimes. I made a commitment, as a result of increasing the precept, to focus on tackling residential burglary, drugs and knife crime. This focus was brought about by establishing a dedicated proactive team called Operation Remedy. This team has, for example, been instrumental in increasing the residential burglary positive outcome rate from 4.4% the previous year to 7.6% in 2019/20. However to achieve this required funding of additional officers through the increased Council Tax precept.

It is also true to say that even where something is recognised as a priority the service that victims receive is not always sufficient: the report correctly highlights the unacceptable conviction rate for rape offences nationally. I again raised the Council Tax precept for the 2020/21 year and a significant portion of the additional funding will be used to recruit a cohort of approximately 67 new staff. The majority of these roles will be police staff investigators. These new roles will be injected into targeted areas of the existing structures where it is believed best value can be added. Some specific areas of focus include Rape and Serious Sexual Offences, Digital Investigations and Fraud; topics all mentioned in the report.

PEEL Assessments

I am pleased that the hard work of Avon and Somerset Constabulary has resulted in it moving from good to outstanding in the efficiency pillar. The Constabulary is one of only six forces to have an outstanding judgement in any of the three pillars. Clearly the ambition is to be outstanding in all aspects and my response to the Avon and Somerset PEEL report provides more detail on how the Constabulary has started to address the specific areas for improvement highlighted by HMICFRS.

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