

Independent Residents Panel Annual Report 2021

Panel Chair - Simon Barnes

March 2022

Foreword by Simon Barnes, Chair of the Independent Residents Panel (IRP)



In March this year I came to the end of my final term as Chair of the IRP, so I've been reflecting on what the panel has achieved and how it has changed since I joined in 2015.

As far as I am aware, the IRP is unique in its autonomy and the amount of access that it has to police complaints files. We dip sample complaints files and it is entirely up to us, as citizens and representatives of the public, to decide what we wish to focus upon. Once we have decided on a theme for a review, the files are selected on a random basis and no information is off limits to us. This means that not only do we review all the official reports and documents on a file, but we also have access to internal correspondence and

documents as well. That level of access means that we can truly scrutinise, on behalf of the public, how the complaints have been dealt with.

It's important to remember that our role is that of a critical friend so, whilst we will always highlight areas where we consider that service has fallen short, we strive to do so in a constructive way which will bring about improvements for the public in future.

Since the pandemic began, we moved our meetings on-line and it is testament to the hard work and professionalism of the officers in the Office of the Police and Crime Commissioner that this was done seamlessly and without any interruption to our schedule of meetings, even during the most difficult parts of the lockdown. Given the sensitivity of the information with which we are dealing, working remotely was not something we had contemplated before but, like a lot of organisations, the pandemic forced us to take a leap forward and I think it's fair to say that the move on-line has been largely positive as it's now far easier for people to participate without having to travel to Police HQ, and the work can be fitted in around other commitments.

Looking forward to the rest of the year, we're going to recruit some new members to the panel and I would encourage anyone who is interested to keep an eye out for the forthcoming adverts and please consider applying. We want the panel to be as diverse as possible and to be representative of the wide range of communities within Avon and Somerset. The work is fascinating and offers a chance to make a real contribution to improving policing for the general public.

Finally, I'd like to conclude by congratulating our new Chair, Kim Smith, who is now in post and I know will do an excellent job in leading the panel during the coming year.

OVERVIEW OF 2021

The panel met 4 times and all meetings took place virtually.

108 complaint files were reviewed.

In March the theme was ‘**Discrimination**’ which was timely because the relationship between the police and under-represented communities has never been more important. The panel had an excellent presentation from the Constabulary’s Inclusion and Diversity Team on the work they are doing to make Avon and Somerset Constabulary a more inclusive and diverse workplace, and how they raise cultural awareness amongst police officers and staff. The panel were impressed by the internal Cultural Intelligence training and in particular by the Safe Space sessions which aim to create a comfortable environment for staff to talk about topical cultural issues such as the Black Lives Matters protest, the toppling of the Colston statue and to understand and discuss terms such as white privilege.

At the June meeting the theme was ‘**Body Worn Video**’ (BWV). The panel have previously commented on how useful this technology can be by creating a record of someone’s interaction with the police. The footage can be used in a criminal prosecution but can also be of great value when a complaint is made and there is a dispute about what happened. However, BWV should still be viewed with a critical eye, bearing in mind that it is only one perspective on a situation, and that the point at which the BWV camera was switched on and off can also be important. The panel identified a number of cases where the BWV footage allowed

complaints to be dealt with efficiently and fairly and were impressed by the leading role which the Constabulary has taken both nationally and internationally in developing BWV as a key tool in policing. The panel did note that one of the limitations of meeting on-line is that it is not always possible to view BWV remotely and this has been fed back to the Constabulary.

In September the theme was ‘**Mental Health**’ which is a category that has not previously been subject to a dip sampling review. The panel had a presentation from the Constabulary’s Mental Health Coordinator who outlined the investment that the Constabulary has made across the organisation in training for staff on how to respond correctly in cases where there is an issue with someone’s mental health. Of particular interest was the development of Mental Health Tactical Advisors. These are staff who are specially trained to act as a bridge between police officers and clinicians to advise on any policing situation where mental health is an issue.

In December the panel met for the final time that year to examine complaints within the category of ‘**Domestic and Gender Abuse**’. The panel were delighted to welcome Police and Crime Commissioner Mark Shelford who introduced himself and there was an opportunity for a brief Q&A session. In addition to dip sampling complaints made by members of the public, the panel also had the benefit of presentations regarding the work that the Constabulary are doing to improve domestic abuse support for officers and staff within Avon and Somerset Police.

DISCRIMINATION



Discrimination and disproportionality are key themes in current debates about policing. In recognition of this, and at the request of the Professional Standards Department, the panel have agreed that at each meeting, regardless of the overall theme, a proportion of the cases reviewed will be complaints about discrimination. This work has begun and the IRP will keep it under review as we progress through 2022.

RECRUITMENT

The panel will be undertaking a major recruitment exercise during 2022 and is aiming to use social media and the Constabulary's network of contacts within the community to encourage people from under represented communities to apply. It is hoped that the move to a virtual format and the flexibility which this brings will also help to improve the panel.



Comments from Avon & Somerset Police and Crime Commissioner Mark Shelford:

"As I draw towards the end of my first year in office I would like to express how grateful I am to all the Panel members for their continued passion, creative thinking, energy and integrity. I realise how precious and valuable your time is, and I thank you for continuing to be so instrumental in supporting my wider role of holding the Chief Constable to account. The insights gained through your scrutiny, the way you both support and challenge Avon and Somerset Police all contribute to ensuring standards are kept high in policing.

I would like to thank Simon for being an excellent chair, a fantastic communicator with great attention to detail, who has led the panel for the last 3 years through the pandemic and never faltered in his commitment.

I am incredibly proud of the work the Panel do and I look forward to the year ahead."

Comments from Head of Professional Standards Detective Superintendent Jane Wigmore:

“On behalf of Professional Standards, I want to thank the volunteers who take the time to review complaints and give valuable feedback and learning to inform improvements for both the department and colleagues who handle complaints on Area.

Feedback on how we use ‘Box’ to share complaint documentation with the public will lead to quarterly dip samples by senior leaders to ensure it is the best tool for complainants whilst balancing data protection issues. There has also been useful learning around use of ‘police’ language in reports which may not be relatable to those making complaints. This learning has been cascaded to complaint handlers.

There have been key areas scrutinised this year, such as discrimination, domestic abuse and mental health. Over the next 12 months, disproportionality and violence against women and girls will no doubt feature heavily in the complaints process and I will explore how we can engage the Independent Resident’s Panel to welcome more scrutiny and transparency.”