

***‘PEEL 2021/22 POLICE EFFECTIVENESS, EFFICIENCY AND LEGITIMACY –
AN INSPECTION OF AVON AND SOMERSET CONSTABULARY’
PUBLISHED BY HMICFRS ON 17TH MARCH 2023
AVON & SOMERSET PCC RESPONSE DATED 12TH MAY 2023***

As Police and Crime Commissioner, the PEEL inspection process enables me to carry out my legal duty of scrutinising and holding to account the Chief Constable. The PEEL report helps me understand how efficient, effective and legitimate the Constabulary are in providing a police service for all our communities.

I am delighted that Avon and Somerset Police has been graded outstanding for their work in “engaging with and treating the public with fairness and respect”. It is only by engaging with the public, and treating them fairly, that the Constabulary can restore public confidence among our communities and help them feel safe.

I’m also pleased that other key areas of policing that the PEEL report assesses have been graded as good or adequate. However, I am concerned about the areas graded as “requires improvement”: recording data about crime, responding to the public, investigating crime and managing offenders.

I will ensure the Chief Constable is addressing the “areas for improvement” (AFIs) identified in the report. The public will be able to see progress through the [Performance and Accountability Board](#) which is broadcast for everyone to see.

Although I will be supporting and challenging the Chief Constable to improve in all these areas it is important to acknowledge the financial situation. Next year the Constabulary will need to find savings to match the £10 million deficit; this deficit is expected to increase year on year until it reaches £19 million in 2027/28. It is more difficult to improve the service while also saving money.

The report contains 17 AFIs: below I set out each of these followed by the initial response.

It should be noted that I have a legal duty to respond to inspection reports within eight weeks of their publication. However, the AFIs cannot be rectified in such a short period of time: that is why a number of the responses are still a work in progress.

Crime data integrity (CDI)

The Constabulary have put in place an action plan to improve CDI and these four AFIs are covered in that plan.

Part of this plan involves conducting a review of the training given to new police officers as well as the training for new staff members who work in the central crime recording team. This review will ensure that the training sufficiently address the AFIs.

There will also be quarterly audits of these AFIs going forward to check and test what progress is being made.

The constabulary needs to improve the accuracy of recording rape crimes and incidents of rape

The constabulary doesn't always correctly record crimes of rape and reported incidents of rape (N100s). We found that the constabulary had recorded 49 of 57 crimes of rape we reviewed which should have been recorded. Of the eight unrecorded crimes of rape, three were incorrectly recorded as N100s, three were mis-classified as other sexual assaults, and two were not recorded at all. Five of the 12 N100s we reviewed were recorded. The constabulary should improve its recording practices to make sure that rape crimes and reported incidents of rape are recorded correctly.

Response

In addition to the aforementioned training for new starters, a bespoke briefing package is also being created for existing officers and staff and updated guidance on N100 is being published.

One of the more common circumstances in which crimes are not recorded – or at least not in a timely manner – is when they are disclosed to staff by the victim of an offence already being investigated. A new process is being tested where an automated system will do a key-word search of records to identify where a rape crime may not have been recorded and these will then be reviewed by staff and an additional crime recorded if necessary.

The constabulary needs to improve its recording of crimes which involve vulnerable victims

The constabulary doesn't record enough crimes which involve child protection or vulnerable adults. We reviewed 70 cases relating to adult or child protection. From these cases we found the constabulary had recorded 25 of the 39 crimes which should have been recorded. Some of the unrecorded crimes were of a serious nature such as controlling and coercive behaviour, sexual assaults and other assaults. When the crime was not recorded there was often limited evidence of investigation or safeguarding the victim. Failure to record these crimes can result in offenders not being identified or brought to justice.

Response

The missed crimes identified here happened when people were being helped through a safeguarding process. A new safeguarding report has been developed on the police system but this will need to be evaluated to understand if it is helping improve crime recording. These cases are dealt with through the Lighthouse Safeguarding Unit and the training packages for this unit are also being reviewed.

The constabulary needs to improve how it records crime when antisocial behaviour is reported

When antisocial behaviour (ASB) is reported to the police, crimes are often not identified and recorded. We reviewed 50 incidents of ASB personal. Of these cases, the constabulary had recorded 13 of the 28 crimes which should have been recorded. Victims of ASB are often the subject of abuse and torment for substantial periods of time and crime is often committed by neighbours. Failing to record crimes and provide an effective service to tackle ASB can mean victims live in fear in their own homes while being subjected to long-term abuse and torment by people living next door or in the local community.

Response

The Constabulary will be reviewing how ASB is recorded in the call handling system – such as the call scripts and how ASB incidents are ‘flagged’ – and how these ASB calls are then transferred to the record management system (Niche) where crimes will be recorded.

The constabulary needs to improve how it records equality data

The constabulary’s data for victims of crime shows that age and gender are well recorded, ethnicity is less well recorded and other protected characteristics aren’t well recorded. The constabulary should be collecting this information to understand the extent to which each protected group is affected by crime, how this differs from those without the protected characteristics, and whether a different response is needed for these victims.

Response

This is a challenge facing all police forces and is due to be discussed at the National Police Chiefs’ Council at the end of May. To be able to do this fully there will need to be upgrades to Niche but these may not happen until 2024.

However, even where the system enables proper recording (such as a person’s ethnicity) this is still not being done consistently. As part of the pioneering Bluestone / Soteria work a bespoke Niche form was created for capturing equality data in rape investigations. The use of this will be assessed to understand if and how this can be applied to all crimes.

Preventing crime and antisocial behaviour

The constabulary should consistently evaluate and share effective problem-solving practice

We found that the constabulary effectively identifies problems and develops problem-solving plans to tackle them. But the evaluation of plans to determine what was successful and what might be repeated again in a similar context was limited, and staff were not routinely aware of how they could learn about successful problem-solving plans used in the past.

The constabulary must better evaluate its problem-solving activities and make sure staff are aware of what works.

Response

The Constabulary have recently introduced a new Niche template to ensure the 'assessment' part of the SARA problem solving model is recorded and within this there is a link for supervisors to identify and send the good practice examples to a central hub. The Constabulary have a problem-solving page on their intranet which highlights successful problem solving as well as linking to external good practice such as the College of Policing 'Practice Bank.' The Constabulary now need to promote these resources and provide support for people to ensure they are being used consistently.

The constabulary needs to ensure that neighbourhood policing officers have access to structured training

The constabulary has no formal training for new neighbourhood policing officers and opportunities for continuing professional development are limited. This means staff aren't always up to date with the best ways to prevent crime and antisocial behaviour.

The constabulary should consider how it develops its neighbourhood policing officers to ensure that the right service is provided and that officers understand the constabulary's approach to community policing and crime prevention.

Response

Three problem solving plan training packages were developed in 2022 which were based on practice scenarios. The implementation of this training has been slower than hoped due to demand and capacity issues, but this will continue so that all neighbourhood officers will receive it.

The Constabulary are also looking to develop specialist neighbourhood policing training in partnership with the University of the West of England (who currently deliver the training for new officers).

Responding to the public

The constabulary should respond to calls for service within its published time frames based on the prioritisation given to the call. Where delays occur, the rationale should be recorded, and victims should be updated

The constabulary assesses how quickly officers should attend a call for service dependent on the level of risk identified by a call-taker. These grades include 'Immediate', which are those calls that should be attended within 15 minutes in urban locations and 20 minutes in rural locations, and 'Priority', which are those calls that should be attended within 1 hour. We found that 17 of 39 incidents we reviewed weren't responded to within these time frames. Some of these involved substantial delays. This included calls from victims of the most serious crimes, where a delayed attendance could lead to the victim not being safeguarded as quickly as possible, or the victim disengaging, or missed opportunities to preserve or obtain evidence.

Victims weren't informed of delays in 2 of 8 relevant cases we reviewed and therefore their expectations weren't always met. This may cause victims to lose confidence and disengage from the process.

Response

The Constabulary have started by focusing on the response to Immediate graded calls which is where the most risk is. They have improved the data that is available and are making it more visible to control room staff and supervisors to enable greater management of incidents, especially when the response time is not likely to comply with the published timescales.

The additional officers recruited through Uplift provide more resource to meet this demand. However, being a police officer does not automatically qualify you to drive in a way not in accordance with the rules of the road: to be able to drive 'on blue lights' officers must be response driver trained. Being able to drive 'on blue lights' can be critical when you only have 15 minutes to respond. The Constabulary have increased the capacity to deliver response driver training courses and have been increasing the proportion of their officers who are qualified in this way – they will continue to move to a position where they are providing this training to officers in year three of their service.

The demand on the police increases over the summer months and this makes it harder to respond to calls within the timescales. The Constabulary will implement their demand management plan (refined from the 2022 work) which should help manage this.

Another factor which hinders the police responding to incidents in a timely way is when officers are committed on work which is not related to crime. The Constabulary have started a significant programme of work looking at how they respond to non-crime demand to understand how they can work differently to free up capacity of their officers and staff.

There have been challenges with vacancies in the control room – including team support roles who are responsible for recalling and updating victims – and recruitment is ongoing to fill these positions.

The constabulary should reduce the number of abandoned 101 calls

The constabulary operates an interactive voice response process for non-emergency (101) calls, a proportion of which are then put through to a switchboard service. Calls that require further action are transferred internally to a call handler by being placed in one of two call queues. One of the queues is for priority 101 calls, and the secondary queue is for low priority non-urgent calls.

The standard for forces in England and Wales with a switchboard is to have an abandonment rate for 101 calls of less than 5 percent. The constabulary told us that between January and August 2022, the monthly call abandonment rate in the primary queue was 1.7 percent each month. However, in the secondary queue this ranged from 16.8 percent to 30.1 percent. This could mean that at times callers may not report their concerns and that vulnerable people aren't getting the service they need.

Response

This report highlights that the Constabulary were the best in the country for answering 999 calls quickly. It is important to note here as the same call handlers that answer 999 calls will also answer 101 calls. The Constabulary have a system whereby a minimum number of call-

handlers are 'protected' to be able to answer 999 calls. In 2022 there were 86,000 more 999 calls than in 2019: a third more calls. This increase in 999 calls necessarily reduces their ability to answer 101 calls as quickly.

As mentioned in the above response there have also been challenges with vacancies in the control room. A secondary control room has been opened in Bridgwater to encourage recruitment in the south of the force area. More variable shift patterns have also been offered to staff to support retention.

The Constabulary have just started a second significant programme of work about 'first point of contact'. This will take a system-wide approach to this demand to understand how it might be dealt with more efficiently and effectively.

The constabulary should make sure that repeat and vulnerable callers are routinely identified

The constabulary doesn't routinely identify if a victim has made a previous call for service, or whether the victim is vulnerable. We found that in 27 of 69 cases we examined, the constabulary failed to identify repeat callers. In 24 of 67 cases we reviewed the constabulary failed to identify vulnerable callers. This means that the constabulary may not respond to victims appropriately or put necessary safeguarding measures in place as early as possible.

Vulnerable and repeat callers should be identified from the outset to make sure that all risk, threat, and vulnerability relating to the caller is identified. This allows a better assessment of the caller's needs to inform the prioritisation given to the call so that it receives an appropriate response. The constabulary has recognised this as an issue and is currently exploring options for an IT-based solution, but must ensure the identification of repeat and vulnerable callers improves.

Response

The Constabulary are currently looking into buying Customer Relationship Management (CRM) software. This software will pull together information from several police systems: such as the call handling system, Niche and the Police National Computer. By instantly combining data together, such as previous calls and vulnerability markers, this provides call handlers with better information on which to make THRIVE (threat, harm, risk, investigation, vulnerability and engagement) risk assessments, which can in turn form a more appropriate response. This is being considered alongside other solutions such as changing or upgrading existing software.

Investigating crime

The constabulary should introduce effective processes for timely allocation of crimes of rape and other serious sexual offences to reduce the backlog

The constabulary's capacity to conduct timely investigations into rape and other serious sexual offences is exceeded by the number of these offences. As a result, such crimes are often left without being allocated to an investigator for a period of time during which evidential opportunities could be lost, as could the confidence of the victim.

The constabulary told us that, between April and June 2022, the number of such unallocated crimes varied between 125 and 48. Although these crimes are kept under review by supervisors and senior officers, they aren't actually being actively investigated.

The constabulary has a dedicated team dealing with rape and other serious sexual offence investigations and has plans to increase the number of suitably qualified investigators in this area. However, this is reliant on the Police Uplift Programme and may not come into effect until 2025.

Response

Cases are classed as unallocated when they do not have a named Officer in Charge (OIC). This does not mean they are forgotten about and instead are held in a 'team tray' managed by an accredited supervisor. The cause of this was due to the lack of accredited detectives locally and nationally. This approach was preferred to immediately allocating all cases which would risk overwhelming inexperienced investigators. It is acknowledged that cases have been slower to progress than we would like.

The next phase of transforming the Criminal Investigations Directorate began in April 2023. As part of this the Bluestone team – which deals rape and other serious sexual offences – will grow from 119 investigators to 145. The Constabulary are also increasing the number of people who have the national 'detective' accreditation as well as building specialist knowledge and experience.

The Constabulary are creating a data tool to visualise the crimes that are not yet assigned to an OIC. This will allow supervisors to see individual cases, how long they have been in the 'team tray' for and the activity that has taken place. This will be in place by the end of May 2023. Until then, there are twice-weekly reviews of the cases in each of the team trays by the respective supervisors.

The constabulary should make sure that an auditable record is kept if a victim withdraws their support for an investigation, and whether an evidence-led prosecution is considered in all such cases

When a suspect has been identified but there are evidential difficulties and the victim doesn't support or withdraws their support for police action, an auditable record from the victim should be held confirming their decision. An auditable record of the victim's wishes was absent in 10 of the 20 cases we reviewed. This represents a risk that victims' wishes may not be fully represented and considered before the investigation is closed.

When victims withdrew support for an investigation, the constabulary didn't always consider progressing the case without the victim's support. This can be an important way of safeguarding the victim and preventing further offences from being committed.

Response

Victims withdrawing support for an investigation is a particular problem in rape cases and through Operation Bluestone (Soteria) the force has developed a data tool which brings together police and Crown Prosecution Service (CPS) data to provide insight into this area. The tool is being developed for potential national roll-out. The Constabulary are

participating in a national pilot which is looking in more detail at when and why rape victims withdraw their support. From this data a new National Operating Model for rape will be set later in 2023. After the initial application in rape cases the Constabulary intend to widen its use to other crimes, starting with Domestic Abuse crimes.

In terms of evidence-led prosecutions the Constabulary will try to ensure there is better use and understanding of guidance provided by both the College of Policing and CPS.

The constabulary needs to improve the quality assurance and supervision of investigations
Investigations should be regularly reviewed by supervisors to ensure that they are properly conducted to a consistent standard, with appropriately managed investigation plans.

We found that 56 of 68 cases we reviewed had appropriate levels of supervision, and that 31 of 40 had suitable investigation plans.

Although templates exist to guide supervisors through this process, and systems exist to monitor when supervision of crimes should take place, these aren't always followed. Without proper supervision, the quality of a constabulary's investigations will not be consistent, leading to some victims receiving a reduced level of service.

Response

The Constabulary have recently created and rolled out a new supervisor review template to guide supervisors through the process and help ensure better and more consistent reviews. The roll out of this was accompanied by additional guidance and training. The Constabulary will continue to monitor use of this template and check and test the quality of these reviews and share good practice across the organisation. This will happen through central teams reporting to the Constabulary Management Board (CMB) as well as at a Directorate level to ensure specific issues are addressed.

Protecting vulnerable people

The constabulary should ensure that risk assessments are effectively supervised, quality assured, and checked for compliance

The constabulary uses a risk assessment tool known as BRAG (Blue, Red, Amber, Green), which is intended to identify vulnerability and safeguarding issues across incidents involving vulnerable parties including adults, children and suspects, and prompts referrals to schools, health providers, and other key partners. The BRAG should work in conjunction with existing risk assessments such as the domestic abuse, stalking, harassment and honour-based violence assessment (DASH).

We found that frontline officers sometimes demonstrated a lack of understanding regarding risk assessment. Officers didn't always complete both a BRAG and a DASH form where both would be required to ensure children at risk are effectively identified and safeguarded. And when both were completed, at times the risk assessments aren't clear, delaying appropriate safeguarding action.

Response

It has been agreed nationally that the DASH will be replaced with the Domestic Abuse Risk Assessment (DARA). This must be implemented by 31 March 2024 and this will necessarily require additional training – which is an opportunity to also address this AFI.

In addition, the Constabulary have agreed to start a project on risk assessments – led by the Head of the Lighthouse Safeguarding Unit – which will specifically address this AFI.

The constabulary should reduce the backlog of applications waiting to be processed

The constabulary doesn't have an automated process to identify opportunities for domestic violence disclosure (DVDs) applications. This relies upon officer knowledge, sufficient dedicated resources, or on victims to make applications themselves to identify potential disclosures. The constabulary does have a designated officer to undertake disclosures with individuals but there is a single individual to cover the whole constabulary area, and without support there are often delays in disclosures to victims.

The constabulary also has delays in processing its child sex offender disclosures (CSODs). At the time of our inspection the constabulary told us there were 43 cases awaiting processing, with 18 exceeding the required timescales of completing an investigation within 45 days.

If potential victims of domestic abuse or sexual offending aren't given information promptly, they can't make an informed decision about their safety and may unknowingly remain at risk.

Response

This AFI has been made more pressing by the fact that, in April 2023, the time allowed to process DVDs reduced from 35 days to 28 days. The single officer that deals with DVDs has temporarily been given additional support by a restricted Police Community Support Officer.

The Constabulary are currently assessing if it would be better to bring together, in one team, the staff who deal with the DVDs and the CSODs. The Constabulary are also looking into robotic process automation used in other force areas to see if it could be adopted here.

Managing offenders and suspects

The constabulary should reduce the time taken to conduct visits and risk assessments on registered sex offenders

Registered sex offenders are subject to visits by offender managers, in order to manage them in the community. The constabulary uses a nationally recognised risk assessment tool, ARMS (active risk management system) to assess the level of risk an offender poses, from very high to low. The risk level determines how often a registered sex offender should be visited by an offender manager.

We found that the constabulary had 217 overdue visits at the time of our inspection, with the oldest overdue visit being months overdue. We didn't find any backlog in high-risk cases but we did find that the constabulary also had a backlog of conducting ARMS risk assessments. This means the constabulary may not have been aware of any developments

in those low to medium-risk cases which might escalate the registered sex offender into a higher risk category. We found 151 overdue assessments, with the oldest again being 8 months overdue.

The constabulary must ensure that visits and risk assessments are carried out in a timely manner.

Response

These visits need to be conducted by MOSOVO (Management of Sex Offenders or Violent Offenders) trained officers. The Constabulary will be increasing the size of the MOSOVO team. In addition they will be training offender managers from outside MOSOVO in order that there is greater pool of resource available to respond to this demand in a flexible way.

The constabulary should ensure its enforcement action against offenders accessing indecent images of children is robust and conducted in a timely manner

We found the constabulary wasn't routinely applying for warrants to secure entry into premises being used by suspects believed to be accessing indecent images of children. Also, the constabulary wasn't routinely using powers of arrest to detain and question these individuals, relying instead on voluntary attendance to the police station.

The constabulary should re-evaluate this approach. It should be more proactive in the use of warrants to secure entry to premises so that evidence can be secured at the earliest opportunity, arrest should also be considered in these cases in order for bail conditions to be applied where appropriate, which adds a further level of protection to potential victims.

Response

The specialist Internet Child Abuse Team (ICAT) deal with these offenders. During the COVID-19 pandemic there were delays in obtaining warrants which led to an increased use of voluntarily attendance for questioning. These ways of working have continued but this AFI is accepted and a clear direction has now been given to ICAT staff to increase the use of warrants and better use their powers of arrest and bail conditions to safeguard children. This will be closely monitored by the Detective Chief Inspector for ICAT.

The constabulary should ensure it has the capacity and capability to manage demand in the internet child abuse team (ICAT) and ensure backlogs are subject to a review process

The constabulary uses the Kent internet risk assessment tool to identify the level of risk posed by those suspected of accessing indecent images of children. This risk assessment determines the timescale by which the constabulary should take action against a suspect, such as by making an arrest or executing a search warrant.

We found that while the constabulary appropriately conducted risk assessments, there were backlogs in action being taken. And the constabulary wasn't checking if the circumstances informing the risk assessment had changed between the point of the assessment being made and the eventual time that action was taken against the suspect.

The constabulary should ensure that the ICAT is sufficiently resourced to effectively deal with its demand, and that if there are delays in taking action against suspects believed to be

accessing indecent images of children, steps should be taken to determine if there has been any change in risk level since the initial assessment.

Response

In December 2022 the Constabulary started a review of ICAT team and processes. This review included looking at how things are done in other forces. In Avon and Somerset their ICAT team deal with all perpetrators of online child abuse and conduct safeguarding visits to children who have uploaded or shared an indecent image for the first time: in other forces this is done by different teams. The backlog is evidence that the current processes are not sustainable.

By the end of May internal recommendations are being made to senior officers about different ways of working for ICAT.

In between the risk assessment being done and action being taken against a suspect the cases are reviewed bi-monthly, as a minimum, to check if there is new information that would change the risk assessment.

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