



west midlands
police and crime
commissioner

Recovery from COVID-19:

The Importance of Policing and Crime when Supporting the West Midlands Economic Recovery from COVID-19

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Introduction

The economic consequences of Covid-19 are going to be significant. The last few months have seen an unparalleled shutting down of large parts of the economy. Forecasters state that the UK is on course to enter an 'unprecedented recession' that is likely to be the deepest we have seen in a hundreds of years. UK Job Centre claimants have risen by 126% already since the start of lock down.¹ Projections suggest these figures are only going to rise further.²

The West Midlands is expected to severely feel the effects of this crisis. Consultancy firm KPMG predict that the economic impact of the coronavirus pandemic will hit the West Midlands harder than any other region. They have said that an analysis of the likely impact this year on the UK's regions, showed that the closure of car plants and mothballing of hundreds of factories connected to the automotive sector, meant the region's economy would shrink by 10.1%. The West Midlands is already home to some of the UK's poorest communities. Three of its seven local authorities - Birmingham, Sandwell and Wolverhampton - are in the top 20 most deprived in the country. Many people within these communities work in low paid and insecure jobs. The economic downturn we are now seeing has meant many of these jobs are disappearing first, with the West Midlands disproportionately affected and at risk of mass unemployment. As McKinsey found in their recent report,

"People and places with the lowest incomes are the most vulnerable to job loss. Nearly 50% of all the jobs at risk are in occupations earning less than £10 per hour."

The forecasted economic effect of Covid-19 is very likely to hit these already disadvantaged communities extremely hard. We will only start to see the true effects of this as the furlough scheme is tapered down.

The Home Office's 2018 report into the *The Economic and Social Costs of Crime*, estimates that, for the 2015/16 period, the total cost of crime against individuals was in the region of £50billion and £9billion for crimes against businesses.³ Further, if we look to Ministry of Justice's 2019 report into the yearly cost of reoffending we can see that for the 2016 period, the yearly cost of reoffending was in the region of £18.1billion.⁴ The modelling and data which provides us these figures are complex and would not benefit from further discussion here – what they show is that when crime goes up there is adverse effect on the economy as a whole.

We can also view this from the reverse perspective, that when society goes through a period of economic hardship there will be an adverse effect on society, which in turn leads to a rise in crime. Crime can be an indicator that not all of the correct economic levers are being pulled in order to reduce impact and harm on people. This can be seen no more clearly than the United Nation's report on the impacts of economic down turn on crime after the 2008 global financial crisis.⁵

Similarly, we have seen a change in factors over the Covid-19 period which have resulted in an increased likelihood and record of certain crime types over the initial period of this crisis. Fraud is anticipated to increase over the next few weeks and months, we have seen an alarming increase in online related Child Sexual Exploitation over this period, as lock down eases and victims are able to present at local authorities we are expecting to see a spike in recorded cases of domestic abuse. All of these crimes have economic

consequences for the individuals involved and therefore also an impact on the wider economy.

This report will highlight how the Office of the Police and Crime Commissioner (OPCC) anticipates the links between economic activity and crime to play out over the next few months, as we enter the recovery stage of the COVID-19 crisis. We will articulate what the OPCC is doing to support the West Midlands with the issues highlighted and how we are working to support the region through the economic recovery in this crisis. Coupled with this, we will also explain what partners can do to mitigate the potential harms to come from these factors. We face a challenging period ahead of us as a region, but through a pre-emptive and coordinated response we can work to support each other through this next stage of the crisis.

Unemployment

The West Midlands Violence Reduction Unit's (VRU) strategic needs assessment of the region, shows that crime deprivation has a similar pattern geographically to the Index of Multiple Deprivation, suggesting correlation with poverty.⁶ This indicates to us that unemployment is linked to an increase in crime.

Gary Becker's seminal work on criminal choices, suggested that low expectations on returns to legal activity may lead to initial involvement in crime and subsequently to a first encounter with the criminal justice system.⁷ In other words, low pay tempts people into maximising their income by other means, criminality.

Witt et al (1998) used a panel of annual data from 1979 to 1993 for ten regions in England and Wales to examine the impact of the growth in earnings inequality and unemployment on five types of criminal activity. They found that 'changes in wage inequality and changes in unemployment are strongly and positively correlated with changes in crime.' Witt et al (1999) then conducted further investigation by using annual crime data from 1986 to 1996 for 42 police areas in the UK. Again, they found high crime rates to be associated with high unemployment and high wage inequality.⁸

Should this be the case, the West Midlands could be on the cusp of a drastic increase in crime. As stated above, many of the communities are deprived already and populated with people who work in the most at-risk jobs. Should these individuals lose their jobs and their economic situations become too perilous, then they may not be able resist turning to criminality.

Young people are also likely to be the most heavily affected. Widely reported research by the Resolution Foundation, suggests youth unemployment could now skyrocket to an additional 640,000 18-24-year-olds in the UK this year alone; leaving a long-lasting legacy for these young people and the British economy.⁹ Analysis by the OPCC shows that for the West Midlands a low estimate indicates between 35,000 and 45,000 18-24 year olds are likely to become unemployed over the next financial year.¹⁰ The lack of a legitimate income and structure within their lives increases the likelihood that these individuals may turn to criminality.

Unemployment and a collapsing economy leads to more people living in deprivation. If large scale unemployment arrives as expected, many households in the West Midlands will

possess a damaging lack of material benefits considered to be basic necessities in a society. Young people especially, will suffer from growing up in these circumstances. New figures show that three-quarters of the boroughs in London with the highest levels of violent offending are also in the top 10 most deprived, while the same boroughs also have higher proportions of children under 20 living in poverty than the London average.¹¹ Webster and Kingston state that what is certain is that living in poverty makes offending and being the victim of a property or violent crime much more likely.¹²

In addition, studies on Adverse Childhood Experiences (ACEs), tell us there is more risk of experiencing ACEs in areas of higher deprivation.¹³ Deprivation itself is also seen as a factor that causes toxic stress within children. The statistical link between ACEs and likelihood of criminality is stark. An ACEs survey with adults in Wales found that compared to people with no ACEs, those with 4 or more ACEs are more likely to have been in prison and have committed violence in the last 12 months.¹⁴ More people living in deprivation, as a result of increased unemployment in the region, would therefore make it more likely that ACEs will be experienced and that more young people will enter into criminality.

It is also the case that young people who leave school during recessions are significantly more likely to become involved in crime than those who leave school while labour markets are more buoyant.¹⁵ The increased poverty and deprivation, as a result of Covid, is therefore likely to leave a long lasting impact and can increase the likelihood of young people entering criminality.

No matter how you look at this issue, it is very likely that the economic effects of Covid are going to negatively impact on crime in the region. As a result, it is essential that actions are taken to help mitigate against these issues.

Our Offer to the West Midlands

The West Midlands Police and Crime Commissioner (PCC) is committed to playing a full part in alleviating the effects of the economic recession on crime in the region, however, action is required from all sectors and partners, specifically the Mayor and Combined Authority, Local Enterprise Partnerships and Local Authorities who have specific powers, resources and responsibilities for economic development in the region. We need collective leadership and action to have any hope in mitigating the impending time bomb.

In May of 2017 the PCC introduced the Living Wage Foundation's Real Living Wage across the West Midlands Police workforce. Following this the PCC has implemented a clause in all procurement contracts which stipulates that providers we procure to must pay their staff the Real Living Wage. The PCC became the first in the country to sign up to the 'Fair Funders' commitment, ensuring all voluntary and community organisations commissioned to provide services also pay the Real Living Wage.

An updated Joint Procurement Strategy for the 2017 – 2020 was created, between the PCC and WMP, and included 'Supporting Economic Development of the West Midlands, Including Social Value' as a key requirement. We have implemented a Social Value Portal into WMP's procurement team's commissioning process. As a result, for every contract that exceeds £100k, 10% of the core evaluation will be measured on the social value offering. This in turn encourages contractors to factor social value into their bid writing processes. One of the PCC's key objectives in his Economic Strategy is to ensure that services procured by the Force are being sourced locally. Throughout the PCC's term, the percentage of force spend

within the West Midlands has increased every year. For example the financial period from 2018-2019 saw an increase of over £5million being spent in the West Midlands.

We have also recently commissioned an 'Enterprise for Employment' scheme, which will specifically support at risk young people who may be or have been involved in gang activity into training, education or employment (including self-employment) utilising an IPS model. Numerous projects funded as part of the Early Intervention Youth fund, involved young people being able to gain qualifications which improve chances of employment. All of the diversion projects funded by our office, including over £600,000 worth in summer 2019, allowed young people to make a positive change in their life, providing them with positive mentors and an alternative activity in which they can put their focus. They helped to give these young people a purpose, whilst building self-esteem and improving their chances of seeking legitimate employment.

In addition to this are the programmes funded by the Violence Reduction Unit, which is housed within the OPCC. It has funded many projects which aim to improve employability within young people including a resettlement project, supporting individuals who have recently left prison back into normal life, intensive support for people leaving gangs and specialist mentoring for young people at risk of violence.

Our ask from partners and government

- Our main asks from other partners are contained within the paper '***A Future Generations Deal: Avoiding the Ticking Time Bomb of Youth Unemployment and Child Vulnerability in the West Midlands***'.¹⁶ This report sets out what we feel are the necessary interventions to tackle the challenges that may arise.
- Partners should commit to a social value requirement as part of their procurement processes and sign up to the Social Value Hub. They can also incorporate a similar framework to our social value portal, which means that all procurement processes include a provider's social value offer as part of their evaluation.
- Partners can commit to recruiting a higher percentage of workers from within the West Midlands, commit to providing the national living wage to all employees and 'Ban the Box' on recruitment forms that ask about an individual's criminal history.
- WMP need to recruit a total of 2,750 people over the next three years. The PCC has recently committed to ensuring that 1,000 of these are from BAME backgrounds to ensure that the Force reflects the communities it serves. What we need from partners is support to ensure that people who are suitably qualified, who are unemployed are signposted to the Force as an option. We are not just looking to recruit uniformed officers, we are in need of both PCSOs and Police Staff. The West Midlands is in need of jobs and employment and WMP has the ability to provide jobs in this current climate.

School Closures

It is clear that the part closure of schools is going to have an effect on the pupils who have not been receiving an education. Although certain year groups are beginning to return to some form of schooling, a lot of children have not. Pupils in years 7, 8 and 9 for example, are not expected to return to school by September 2020 at the earliest. This means that children aged 11-14 will not have received schooling for over 6 months. Currently, there is no guarantee that in September all children will be in full time education.

There are concerns about the affects this could have on the children within this group. The prolonged absence for these children is similar to that experienced by those children who are excluded from schools. It is well documented that school exclusions have serious negative effects on the individuals. It removes a large amount of positive structure, support and influence from their lives and sometimes leads to them falling out of the education system altogether.

Of concern to our office particularly, is the possibility that this enforced absence of a large proportion of the school population, will increase the likelihood that some of these children will end up involved in crime. It is right to recognise exclusion as one indicator, among others, of a higher risk of exposure to and involvement in crime, as both victims and perpetrators. For example, excluding a child from school makes them more vulnerable to be groomed by gangs and involved in crime. The National Crime Agency's (NCA) Report on County Lines 2018 states that children who are excluded 'from mainstream schooling are frequently targeted by county lines offenders'.

The sustained lack of the schooling means children have fewer positive activities with which to occupy themselves and may be more susceptible to turning to criminal behaviours. Gangs who are known to target young children who are not in school, now have a much enlarged number of potential recruits. Particular issues may arise for children with troubled home situations, who may experience abuse and neglect. A sustained period at home could make them more vulnerable to exploitation.

In addition, many children, particularly pupils already struggling with academic expectations and/or those from disadvantaged families, may find it extremely difficult to return to their studies with the rhythm and work discipline that the school environment brings. (In France, where children have returned to school, they are already experiencing this trend.)

As a result of these concerns, we feel it is vital action is taken to reduce the potential consequences of this.

Our Offer to the West Midlands:

Our office does what it can to help tackle this issue. The PCC has continually pushed the issue of school exclusions to the forefront of the local agenda. He has publicly called for a cross government strategy into tackling school exclusions. Despite the current crisis, our office has committed to maintaining funding to community organisations which help to deliver diversionary activities for young people. These will become even more important over the next few months to provide a valid alternative to school. Furthermore, the VRU has a specific education strand. Within this, they are looking into exclusions and what alternative provisions can be taken to support these children. Specific education leads have been appointed to deal with these issues.

Our ask of government and partners:

- Schools should work to identify those most at risk and provide support and provision for them, therefore keeping them away from crime.
- Students should be kept engaged in academic activity, whether through online learning or work that is sent home.
- Contact should be maintained, and support should be provided, where needed.
- Partners should also support local organisations in providing additional diversionary activities, to provide alternative opportunities for these young people when not in school.
- A number of schools have moved teaching online, however, we know that significant numbers of young people from deprived and disadvantaged backgrounds will lack the means to have laptops and access to internet, therefore excluding them from access to good quality online educational materials. This will further exacerbate the educational inequalities which persist in our community. The Local Authorities and the Combined Authority should ensure that schools in the West Midlands are getting full access to government specific funds to schools to enable them to purchase laptops and internet access to young people in need.

Youth Violence

The West Midlands Violence Reduction Unit, (VRU), recognises that the risk factors relating to susceptibility to violence are exacerbated by the pandemic in regards to youth violence, exploitation and domestic abuse. Anecdotally through consultation with providers and key partners and stakeholders it is clear that a lack of physical support, the closure of key establishments such as schools and the inability of vulnerable people to access services has led to an increase in harm and vulnerability. The true scale of this is likely to become clearer as lockdown measures ease.

Service providers commissioned by the VRU are working hard to amend/change the way in which they are delivering services to ensure that they maintain an offer for those they are working with despite being unable to support them with face-to-face contact. There is an appreciation that this poses a challenge to those smaller-micro organisations working on the frontline, which are having to access PPE, operating with reduced staffing and working to digitalise their offerings. Additional funding from the Home Office has been secured to support these organisations in responding to these risks and challenges presented by the pandemic.

Our offer to the West Midlands

The VRU is working to implement a public health approach to violence and vulnerability, and at the centre of this approach is encouraging and delivering upstream approaches to violence prevention. One of the key thematic areas of work under development by the VRU is to increase collaboration and support for partners in the education space, who are ideally placed to support and nurture young people to go on to lead safe and fulfilling lives. Key interventions in this space include Mentors in Violence Prevention (MVP) - a peer-led mentoring programme in schools, and the development of a core and universal offer with schools across the West Midlands. The VRU recognises that work in the education space must also identify and enhance those transition points to further education, training and employment and will be working to develop advice and guidance to support these key transition points in collaboration with education partners.

The VRU is also placing an emphasis on trauma-informed awareness and practice; attendance, attainment and employment readiness is linked to mental resilience in addition to specific skills and experience gained through education skills and training.

Our ask of government and partners

- To consider how they incorporate trauma informed awareness/practice into their everyday business
- To consider opportunities to support/strengthen transition pathways across the Employment Training and Enterprise (ETE) space
- To identify and reduce inequalities within systems linked to opportunity re ETE.
- To ensure that the voice of those most affected is incorporated into service design and delivery going forward e.g. youth voice, co-production with communities.

Fraud

In the UK the City of London Police (CoL) states that £2.2 billion was stolen from victims through fraudulent activity in the 2018-2019 financial year, with a reported 741,123 cases. However Experian, the credit rating agency, estimate the total cost of fraud to the UK economy to be closer to £193billion. In the West Midlands 35,964 cases were reported with a total loss of £58.8 million lost to victims in the same financial year. If we extrapolate the amount of fraud recorded in the West Midlands out at the same ratio projected by Experian then the actual amount lost to fraud in this period will be closer to £6.8billion.

Nationally, 65% of fraud reports were against businesses, with 35% of the reports being against individuals. In the West Midlands 71% of our reported cases were against businesses and 29% were against individuals. Nationally in this period 24% of fraud victims asked for victim support; in the West Midlands 29% asked for victim support. From these figures we can see that in the West Midlands our fraud victims are disproportionately asking for support compared with the national average. This would suggest that our victims need more support.¹⁷

Previous trends after natural disasters and great world events, such as the 2008 financial crash, have all seen a spike in cases of fraud in the aftermath of the event.¹⁸ Even after the Australian Bush Fires we saw a spike in Australian fraud cases, with a spread of charity donation scams across the globe.¹⁹ The reasoning for this is because disasters present current and potential fraudsters with the fraud triangle: opportunity, motivation and rationalisation.²⁰

From an opportunity perspective COVID has presented fraudsters with the perfect climate in which to commit fraud. People are feeling vulnerable, especially financially. They also feel isolated and removed from friends and family. They are in constant reach of technology, be this either for work or domestic purposes. This therefore provides great opportunity for fraudsters. There are greater opportunities now than ever: with an altered normal, people do not know the current boundaries of this climate and what to expect from statutory services. This therefore means that both businesses, individuals and indeed the state are more susceptible to financial crime.

From a motivation perspective, there will of course be pre-existing fraudsters taking advantage of the current climate. However, at present, and over the coming months, people will be being placed under increased financial hardship. This will in turn motivate individuals who historically have not committed fraud, to consider taking advantage of the opportunities which are presented to them.

The final element of the fraud triangle is rationalisation. This is ultimately the process a fraudster goes through when they justify a fraudulent act. A fraudster will weigh up the chances they have for getting caught and/or the overall harm they will cause; versus the pay off and reward for committing the crime. In the COVID climate we are seeing this come to bear with clear results, where fraudsters clearly believe they can get away with committing fraud because of the sheer number of opportunities which are presented.

It should be noted that the City of London Police, over the past few months, have seen an increase in the total number of COVID related frauds. They have not seen an increase in the total number of frauds generally being reported in to their central reporting mechanism – Action Fraud.

At present, reporting of fraud is so poor that this does not give us an accurate picture of whether we are actually experiencing a national increase in frauds committed. That being said if we look at the trends of previous national crises, especially those that have deep ramifications for the economy, we can expect to see numbers of fraud cases rise for the period when people are experiencing extended financial hardship. We are therefore presently at a point, that as a region we need to be improving our coordination around economic crime.

A large number of medium and large financial businesses have premises and even headquarters within the force area, which makes us more likely to experience fraud against our businesses than other forces; a great number of jobs rely on our financial sector flourishing. This leaves our region more open to fraud and therefore our economy is more vulnerable to financial crimes.

Our offer to the West Midlands

At the OPCC we have been working hard to lobby for change in how the UK responds to fraud. Our recommendations for how this change can be achieved is soon to be published in a report which has been produced in partnership with Birmingham City University.

The OPCC currently leads a West Midlands Fraud Board, whose membership consists of both public and private sector organisations. The focus of this board is to support WMP with the way in which they deliver protect messaging across the region and to provide a space for increased collaboration in the fraud prevention space.

The OPCC is currently funding a Protect Officer to better support the distribution of advice across the region of how businesses and individuals can protect themselves against fraud.

We are currently in the process of setting up a West Midlands Cyber Resilience Centre, which will offer support and guidance to SMEs in the West Midlands wanting to protect themselves against cyber-crime and fraud. With the income generating model this project is taking, we are hoping to have this centre self-funding within a year.

Our ask of government and partners

- We would ask that partners work with the Police to help deliver 'Protect' messaging across their council areas and through channels that they have access to. Some

public sector organisations, such as Fire Services, have access to vulnerable victims that the Police will find harder to access. To effectively teach people how to educate themselves we need awareness raising campaigns and practical advice to be distributed through channels which are most likely to reach potential victims.

- We need a commitment by businesses and organisations which experience fraud to report frauds to Action Fraud. Through the gathering of this data, we will start to get a better picture of the fraud landscape in the West Midlands and be better placed to protect against it and pursue prolific criminals.
- We would ask that partners and government pay close attention to our recommendations report which has been written in partnership with BCU. This report captures our recommendations for how to improve the national fraud landscape

Criminal Justice System

COVID-19 has had a fundamental impact on the criminal justice system and threatens to undermine public trust and confidence in it.

There are concerns that the continuation of this emergency will lead to increased unemployment, poverty and lower aspirations, particularly in young people. With the potential for crime rates and violence to increase over the summer months, it is vital that the criminal justice system can respond and offer confidence to the public.

The impact of social distancing on the court system in particular means that there is a huge backlog in cases that will not be quick to work through or resolve.

The OPCC is committed to working with criminal justice partners to resolving emerging issues and to identifying new and innovative ways of working to tackle crime and reduce reoffending.

Our offer to the West Midlands

At the OPCC, we have been working hard to coordinate the Criminal Justice System, utilising our existing governance structures. The PCC is chair of the LCJB and therefore utilises the role of convener in order to bring partners together. Due to the geographical footprint of our criminal justice partners and to avoid duplication, we agreed to utilise the Regional Criminal Justice Forum which covers West Midlands, Staffordshire, Warwickshire and West Mercia as the key forum for responding to the COVID-19 emergency. The PCC, David Jamieson chairs this meeting on behalf of the four PCCs. In order to respond to emerging issues, separate task and finish groups have been set up to focus on early prison release and criminal justice recovery. The Deputy PCC chairs both meetings on behalf of the region. The early prison release task and finish group has worked through the process of early releases, responding to issues or problems between agencies effectively. The criminal justice recovery group aims to work with emerging issues in the system but also identify areas of good practice that have emerged under COVID-19 that would like to be retained post-COVID. A performance analyst group is working towards system wide performance, covering the issues from COVID-19 and court backlogs.

We have developed a Prison Release Package to support individuals leaving prison during a very difficult period of time. Working with existing providers to identify extra capacity, this is intended to complement the existing support provided by the National Probation Service and Community Rehabilitation Company. The support was originally intended to support the early prison releases but the numbers have been small and therefore the offer has been

made available for all business as usual releases. Providers such as those supporting our new chance programme for women have shifted their services from providing a support to women at the earliest point of the justice system (custody) to support women leaving the prison estate. This support is intended to prevent reoffending and therefore saving cost to the system and taxpayer.

The OPCC is working to deliver a coordinated diversion hub, supported by wider third sector organisations such as Revolving Doors and Centre for Justice Innovation. The aim is to coordinate all existing diversion options into one 'hub' and to identify any gaps that could help to further support reducing reoffending and therefore saving money to the taxpayer.

Our ask of government and partners

- We would ask that partners work with the OPCC and Policing to develop more innovative ways of tackling the current court backlog. Government should give more powers to local and regional criminal justice agencies to enable these obstacles to be worked through quickly, rather than waiting for national decisions.
- We are looking to the West Midlands Combined Authority to coordinate work on accommodation, particularly on release from prison but also to support individuals who would otherwise be homeless. This support needs to continue post-Covid.
- The court backlog is significant and has the potential to undermine trust and confidence in the criminal justice system. The OPCC have asked government for emergency funding to support further development of out of court disposals and diversion opportunities. Evaluation carried out by West Midlands Police, suggests that where an Out of Court Disposal (OCD) is used as a diversion from court for low level offences by offenders with minimal criminal history, the reduction in reoffending compared with similar offenders given a court outcome, can be as much as 70%. This appears to be particularly the case where the intervention has been designed for use with Out of Court Disposals.
- Additionally there are cost savings arising from diversion from court. The OPCC will work with PCC colleagues across the region and other partners, including the NPS and CRC to regionally co-commission gaps in OCDs consistently across the region.

Organised Crime

County Lines and Human Trafficking

Not surprisingly, criminals have been quick to adapt their business models and seize opportunities during the COVID-19 pandemic to generate significant amounts of profit. The flexibility and adaptability of Organised Crime Groups (OCGs) has meant that despite a nationwide lockdown and a restriction on movement for many, some organised criminality has intensified during the pandemic.

The increased risk of unemployment due to the financial impact of businesses of COVID-19 and the closure of schools pose the significant risk to vulnerable adults and children. With an increase to unemployment comes an increase in the risk of exploitation for those who are desperate to earn money or meet their basic needs.

The drastic reduction in public transport networks was expected to impact on the viability and continuation of county lines across the country, however, British Transport Police have

reported 'typical weeks'²¹ in their operations to target county lines, despite a 94% reduction in train timetables.

A report by the National Youth Agency- 'Hidden in Plain Sight'²² concurs that whilst initial figures suggest a reduction in the number of children being exploited into County Lines, more in-depth analysis would suggest that there has been a change in behaviour patterns, as opposed to an overall reduction in numbers. We need to be working together to target the criminals behind these operations and to safeguard vulnerable young people from being recruited into criminal activity.

Similarly, referrals of suspected modern slavery victims has dropped for the first time in four years during the start of the coronavirus crisis²³. It is not necessarily the case that fewer people are being exploited and suggests that the pandemic has meant that exploitation is happening behind closed doors and lockdown restrictions have made it more difficult for people to escape their abusers.

An increased demand on some businesses to provide goods and services, means that they too may also become vulnerable to organised criminals infiltrating their operation²⁴. The increased demand for labour and the simultaneous loss of jobs may mean those vulnerable and looking to make ends meet could be exploited to work in poor, underpaid and unsafe conditions. Where we can, we need to reduce the risk of unemployment in the region and support businesses to continue operating in a safe and protected manner.

Our offer to the West Midlands

As mentioned above, the PCC has been a strong advocate for tackling school exclusions and the detrimental impact it can have on young children being recruited into Criminality- this is now even more important with system wide education closures and alternative provision being provided for many. The office has strong links and commissioning relationships with community organisations which help to deliver diversionary activities and education and training opportunities for young people not able to return to formal education. These will become even more important over these next few months to provide a valid alternative to school.

Our ask of government and partners

- Tackling exploitation and human trafficking requires a multi-agency approach, bringing together agencies and services exposed to a wide demographic of people who are vulnerable to being exploited. The lack of sustained education for young people during the crisis and potentially during recovery phases, will require a range of diversionary projects and specialist services aimed at helping young people exit gangs safely and also helping them avoid becoming involved in gang activity. With the current crisis impacting on employment and viability of organisations, a serious decline in the number of youth workers and availability of diversionary activities could lead to an increase in young people coerced into criminal activity. We ask that partners help provide and fund these services and activities.
- As a region we need to understand what the landscape looks like for services tackling exploitation, for those supporting young people and where possible offer education and training to individuals and businesses to identify where exploitation may be occurring.
- We need to share data across agencies to identify at risk young people and develop multi agency interventions.

Business Crime

With most businesses being closed, and access restricted to those that are open, Robbery/Burglary Business/Theft Shops and Stalls have seen significant reductions during Covid-19. Recorded crime for these offences against businesses in 2020 are circa 50% down on last year to date (from 5,432 to 2,728). WMP predict that as businesses start to re-open burglaries will be discovered, leading to an increase in reports. However, numbers will likely be fewer than first anticipated due to the general availability of goods following the initial panic buying. WMP also expect that traditional hotspot locations for thefts from shops and stalls will increase significantly as those locations begin to re-open and restrictions begin to be lifted. Acquisitive crimes may see an increase as the socio-economic impacts of Covid-19 begin to be felt more, in particular when the end of the furlough scheme results in redundancies leading to an increase in unemployment. Whilst low numbers in comparison, Arson and Criminal Damage have seen increases during Covid-19. Up until the end of April 20 there were 509 recorded incidents, up 38% on the 370 recorded for the same period last year. Similar to burglary, as businesses start to re-open it is possible that criminal damage may be identified by business owners leading to an increase in reports.

More widely, the Covid-19 pandemic has created opportunities for increased:

- Cybercrime – Criminals are abusing the demand people have for information and supplies through cyber-attacks including phishing campaigns and ransomware attacks
- Fraud – Fraudsters have been quick to adapt well-known schemes to target businesses during the pandemic. These include telephone fraud schemes, supply scams and decontamination scams
- Counterfeit and sub-standard goods – The sale of counterfeit healthcare and sanitary products as well as personal protective equipment (PPE) and counterfeit pharmaceutical products has increased significantly during the pandemic²⁵

There is also a strong possibility that a proportion of crime experienced by business during the pandemic may go unseen. A previous study found that of those small businesses who suffered from at least one disruptive crime (Theft, Burglary, Cybercrime) in the two years prior, 21% did not report the crime to any authorities²⁶

Our offer to the West Midlands

The OPCC have supported dissemination of NBCC guidance to businesses during the pandemic, this guidance outlines both what businesses can do to protect themselves during this time as well as the powers/role of the police. Covered in this are several points for closed premises/venues, more information [can be found here](#)

In addition to this, WMP have engaged directly with regional managers from big supermarket chains to guide/advise on how the police are able to support during this time and to send out a consistent message to all supermarkets in the area.

The OPCC is continuing to work with WMP to improve the robustness of business crime recording, so that we get a more accurate picture of business crime across the force area.

Our ask of government and partners

- We ask that LA's engage with BIDs to put out messages regarding business crime advice over this period. Key advice being the NBCC guidance referenced above and the NCSC guidance on cyber security which [can be found here](#)

- CSPs should actively work to raise any emerging concerns and discuss strategies of support for their specific areas and feed this back to NPUs.
- Given that 20% of business crime may go unreported, partners need to work together to encourage greater levels of reporting in order to give a more accurate picture in terms of scope and scale which in turn would better inform the planning of police resources
- It has been highlighted previously that “Government budget cuts, a reduction in policing numbers, and upsurge in violent crime and changing policing priorities are all factors that lead BID operating in areas and ... town centre[s]... vulnerable to a downturn in economic prosperity that can rapidly lead to urban decay”²⁷. Given the current context, partners and BIDs should lobby the Government for more support/funding for security measures during this time

Homeless population

Many of the homeless population have regular contact with the criminal justice system. A 2012 MoJ study found that 15% of prisoners were homeless prior to conviction.²⁸ Further to this the study found that 60% of prisoners felt that having somewhere to live was integral to stopping them reoffending.²⁹ Reducing or eradicating homelessness is therefore likely to have a huge impact on reducing stress the criminal justice system and also related harm this has on the economy. Worryingly however new Ministry of Justice figures suggest that during lockdown more than 1,000 prisoners were released into homelessness and forced to sleep rough.³⁰ To break the re-offending cycle this needs to be addressed.

The government push to house the rough sleeper population at the start of lockdown, funded through the Ministry of Housing, Communities and Local Government, saw what had historically been deemed impossible, happen overnight. At the start of lock down 5,500 rough sleepers were brought in and housed in hotels and hostels across the country to halt the spread of the COVID-19 virus.³¹ This accounts for an estimated 90% of the recorded rough sleepers in the country.³² Thankfully the government has now extended this scheme, through announcing an additional £85million of funding on the 24th of June 2020, to allow councils to continue supporting this population.³³ Given this, specific thought now needs to be given to ensuring that those released from prison are provided adequate housing on release as well.

There are further concerns about an increase in rough sleeping after the restrictions on rent evictions ease, with the private rented sector wanting to replace current tenants with tenants who are in a financially sound enough position to pay their rent.

Our offer to the West Midlands

COVID-19 has given us the opportunity to renew our working relationships with third sector organisations who are working to address the issues of homelessness. Since lockdown began there has been greater communication between statutory agencies and charitable organisations and this improved communication has had a positive impact on working relationship between partners particularly in Birmingham. We must ensure that we continue to have good communication between partners to successfully make an impact in this area.

Our ask of government and partners

- Through the Mayor's Homelessness Taskforce we would recommend a paper going into central government articulating that specific thought needs to be given to how the prisoner population is housed on release from prison during this crisis.
- We also need to lobby to central government to ensure there are protections in place to mitigate a rise in homelessness once private renting eviction restrictions are eased. A plan for this should be developed in the Mayor's Homelessness Taskforce.
- Local Authorities should also use the Mayor's Homelessness Taskforce as an active space to share examples of best practice and collaborate around given areas of success.

Victims Services

While health responses remain a priority, concerns have emerged on the short and long-term impact that the pandemic and the measures taken to control it have and are likely to have on victims of crime.

Covid-19 has seen courts closures, early releases from prison, increasing unemployment and serious implications for people's mental health. Throughout this report it has been mentioned that Covid-19 is having a disadvantageous impact on the most deprived communities within our region, affecting those who are already deemed vulnerable. Victims of crime are no exception. Crimes such as domestic abuse have seen a sharp rise. Domestic abuse calls to local and national helplines increased by a quarter in the week following lockdown. In a statement issued by the national confederation of organisations representing services delivering violence against women and girls (VAWG) across the UK, it has been stated that Covid-19 will allow perpetrators to use social distancing and lock down measures as a tool of coercive and controlling behaviour. Access to support for women and children may also shrink further due to social isolation and those in poverty will be severely impacted. This will place even greater pressure on the police, the NHS and local authorities.

According to the West Midlands Police Strategic Assessment for 2019-2020; out of a total of 35,000 crimes recorded in 2018, 25,808 were domestic abuse incidents indicating domestic abuse was already a significant demand on policing resources within the West Midlands prior to the covid-19 emergency.

Across victim services we are seeing;

1. Demand outstripping the support which is available particularly in relation to domestic abuse
2. An increased risk of child abuse as families are trapped at home and children not attending school
3. Increasing prevalence of child sexual exploitation online due to the increased use of technology by young people

4. Victims feeling the impact of overstretched police forces
5. Delayed access to justice as a result of changes to charging by the Crown Prosecution Service and the closing down of courts

Cost to the economy:

A recent report by the Home Office estimated the social and economic cost for victims of domestic abuse in year ending March 2017 in England and Wales was approximately £66 billion. The report suggests an estimated £14 billion arising from lost output due to time off work and reduced productivity as a consequence of domestic abuse. Some of the cost was borne by Government such as the costs to health services (£2.3 billion) and the police (£1.3 billion). The majority of the cost of victim services falls to Government departments, such as housing costs which totalled £550 million, (this includes temporary housing, homelessness services and repairs and maintenance).

These costs are set to increase with services having to stretch their provision to meet the increased demand as well as develop new services to respond to lock down and social distancing measures.

There have already been huge financial implications for voluntary sector providers and the government has pledged millions of pounds into Covid-19 contingency planning for victim support services. The Ministry of Housing, Communities and Local Government has provided £10 million for safe accommodation services across England. The Department for Education has provided £26.4 million to support vulnerable children, including support for families of disabled children and working to safeguard vulnerable children including care leavers and children in the early years. The Ministry of Justice has provided £25 million to help victims of domestic abuse and sexual violence in the community access support services during the coronavirus outbreak, and a further £3 million per annum to Independent Sexual Violence Advisers until 2022. The Home Office has provided £3.8 million for community-based domestic abuse services and modern slavery services, and for added support for modern slavery charities who have been impacted by the coronavirus outbreak.

Our offer to the West Midlands

The coronavirus pandemic will fundamentally change the way many organisations operate for the foreseeable future. It is critical that the Criminal Justice Sector, and victim services more specifically, think tactically in the short term and strategically beyond the crisis, to embrace new ways of working that are flexible and work across the system to make the victim journey easier. Through existing strategic partnerships and regional coordination the OPCC will continue to support a whole systems approach to recovery.

The Victims Commission, which is a strategic platform made up of individuals from across the voluntary and statutory sector, will continue to advise how to deliver improved co-ordination and consistency of service to victims of crime during and beyond the Covid-19 pandemic. Commission members will continue to represent the voice of the victim and continue to ensure services meet the ongoing and changing needs of victims. More information on the Victims Commission and the priorities for this office can be found in the Police and Crime Plan 2016-2020.

COVID-19 has created a backlog of cases for the Criminal Justice System. Many victims and witnesses had lacked confidence in the system even before the coronavirus outbreak. The crisis has placed an already-stretched criminal justice system under increasing pressure. The West Midlands Local Criminal Justice Board exists to improve collaboration across criminal justice agencies and to deliver system wide efficiency and effectiveness. An efficient Criminal Justice System is at the heart of both the response to COVID-19 and how we recover going forward. Through the Victims and Witnesses Delivery group, the OPCC will continue to coordinate a whole systems approach to ensuring better services for victims and witnesses.

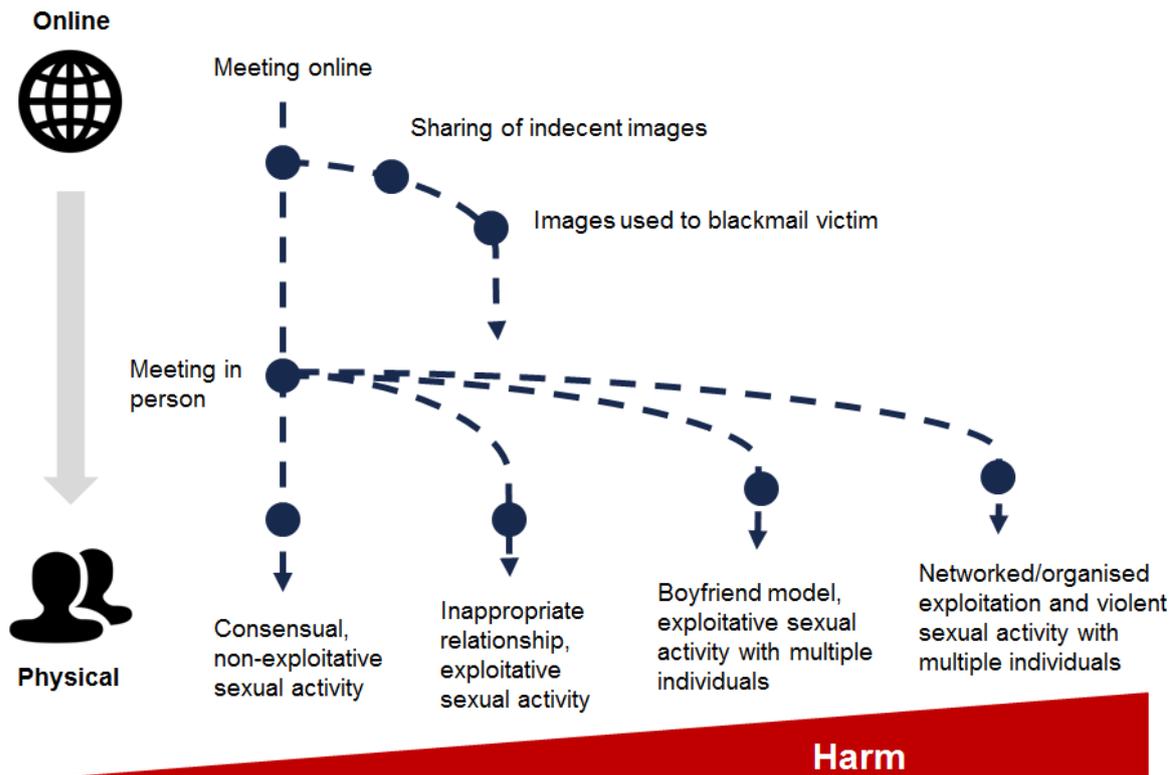
Our ask of government and partners

- As a region we need to understand the current landscape and what this looks like for victims of crime. We need to work together utilising existing structures to find appropriate solutions. Through the Victims Commissions, Community Safety Partnerships and the regional strategic Exploitation boards we need to develop our understanding of how Covid-19 has affected the most vulnerable in our society.

Child Sexual Exploitation

Like most hidden crimes the true extent and nature of Child Sexual Exploitation (CSE) is unknown. It is predicted that each year only a quarter of child abuse cases become known to police forces.³⁴ Most victim may not fully understand the grooming process that offenders go through to recruit and exploit them and as they are often the most vulnerable members of their community, the harm can go unnoticed by professionals or carers for a long time. Within the Covid-19 pandemic children and adults are more likely to be accessing the online world and therefore there is an expectation of escalation to risk of online harms and exploitation for children from adults and peers who abuse them. Last year, research indicated that “In the UK alone, it is estimated there are 80,000 people who present a sexual threat to children online.”³⁵ The National Crime Agency predicted that prior to the start of lockdown there were “at least 300,000 people who pose a sexual threat to children”³⁶ either through physical or online means. Within the Covid context, young people are likely to be the generation most impacted in terms of job and employment prospects by the pandemic. Young people will be at further risk from exploitation both online and through organised criminal groups. The Independent Inquiry into Childhood Sexual Abuse (IICSA) found “The links between CSA and socioeconomic outcomes have been shown to continue into mid-adulthood, with CSA being associated with: increased unemployment and time out of the labour market; increased receipt of welfare benefits; income and financial instability; and reduced incomes. The evidence suggests that poor physical or mental health could be the link between CSA and lower socioeconomic outcomes in many cases.”³⁷

Like most interpersonal abuse the cost to health and social care systems are also great. The cost of child sexual abuse in the UK is predicted to be £3.2billion a year.³⁸ The mental health impact of sexual abuse can contribute to lengthy and debilitating post-traumatic stress which makes coping with life difficult. Online grooming is often a pre-cursor to physical exploitation. It is estimated that around 3,500 children aged 11-16 years within the West Midlands may have shared indecent images of themselves. Nationally, the number of referrals to the NCA relating to online child sexual exploitation has increased by 700% in 4 years.³⁹



Our offer to the West Midlands

The Violence Reduction Unit (VRU) in conjunction with others in the PCC’s office have recently established regional strategic Exploitation boards to replace the previous Preventing Violence to Vulnerable People (PVVP) agenda. The West Midlands Criminal Exploitation and Missing Board has been established to ensure that there is an effective joined up approach to preventing, identifying and responding to safeguarding children, young people and adults at risk of or experiencing exploitation. Multi-agency partners work together to share and develop regional programmes of support for the exploitation agenda. Our offer is to work to look at effective ways across the strands of health, education, exploitation, criminal justice and sports to reduce the effects of the global covid-19 pandemic on those most vulnerable to exploitation. By implementing preventative work and promoting working through Adverse Childhood Experiences (ACE’s) and Trauma Informed methods, we aim to support agencies to work together to improve outcomes for children and support them to thrive.

Our ask of government and partners

- In a letter to industry partners in May 2020, James Brokenshire MP, Minister of State for Security, asked for partners to support in countering online child sexual exploitation and abuse within the covid-19 pandemic.⁴⁰ His specific asks were for technology companies who are often those to first become aware of risks to children, to track and update partners to enable them to combat these issues. We would echo this sentiment and encourage the open dialogue to shine a light on these issues for vulnerable children in need of protecting.
- The NSPCC’s Head of Child Safety Online Policy Andy Burrows, said: “The coronavirus pandemic has brewed the perfect storm for abusers to exploit existing platform weakness and groom children. Now more than ever tech firms must protect

our young people."⁴¹ We ask that in the recovery plans partners make moving forward from the covid-19 pandemic that they understand the needs for multi-agency working and that they appreciate the particular needs of child to adult transitions within CSE. The commonality of exploitation into adulthood particularly for those in care are key factors to remember.

- The return to school will be a big indicator of how affected children nationally have been both by the impacts of the pandemic and the potential for identification of abuse. The Violence Reduction Unit have developed a set of education toolkits in response to Covid and we encourage these to be shared with partners ([here](#)).
- The Online Harms White Paper proposal, particularly through the implementation of an independent regulator, goes a long way to protect our children online but more is needed from social platforms which fail to safeguard and in some circumstances put children at further risk from those purporting to befriend them online. We would ask that a joined up approach as proposed in the 'Voluntary Principles to Counter Online Child Sexual Exploitation and Abuse'⁴² is adopted by partners and pushed by government.

Transport

Keeping our roads flowing and people safe whilst they travel across the West Midlands is invaluable to industry, jobs and supporting the economy of the West Midlands. The Covid climate changed how we police our transport infrastructure immeasurably during lockdown.

In the first four weeks of lockdown, we saw a 27% drop in vehicle crime across the UK.⁴³ As Britain was instructed to stay at home we saw massive drops in the number of crimes which were committed on our roads and also on our public transport infrastructure. Admittedly some drivers have seen the clearer roads as an opportunity to flout speeding limits, with some drivers being recorded to reach speeds of up to 163mph on the UK's motorways.⁴⁴ Road Traffic Collisions (RTCs) have reduced during the lockdown but remain proportionately high considering the significant reduction in traffic on the roads. RTCs have a significant impact on the economy with every fatal incident costing on average £2.2m.⁴⁵ This being said reduced traffic on the roads has meant that criminal activity has been easier to spot on the road network.

The same can be seen on our public transport network. With a 94% reduction in rail travel over the COVID period, spotting activities such as county lines activity has been made a lot easier for British Transport Police. This is not to say that county lines activity has ceased, it has just been made a lot easier to spot with there being fewer passengers on the rail network. In the changed climate, some types of crime have increased. Spitting on key workers, and specifically bus drivers, is a theme we have seen across transport related policing over this period and is one which is likely to continue over the recovery period as we exit this crisis. A specific recent incident in Ladywood highlights how disputes between bus drivers and aggressive members of the public are evolving where the Covid 19 infection is used as a threat.⁴⁶

As the UK starts to unlock we are likely to see transport based and transport enabled crimes return to their original recorded rates. However the nature, makeup and distribution of these crimes are likely to shift with the changing climate. It is expected that we will see a greater adoption of car based transport over the next 12 months, with commuters not wanting to expose themselves to confined public transport which poses the risk of COVID-19 exposure.⁴⁷ This will affect how we police the transport infrastructure over the next year.

More work will need to be done to increase force capabilities to spot criminals amongst the increased traffic and deal with the likely shift of crimes such as county lines reverting to the road network. The COVID climate has also seen a massive increase in people turning to cycling as a form of transport, with sales of push bikes increasing by 500% since the start of the lock down.⁴⁸ There is likely going to be a greater level of focus needed on protecting vulnerable road users as more cyclists emerge on the roads. Operations, such as operation close pass, will need to be stepped up to keep ahead of the increased fatalities we could see with increased cars and also cyclists on the roads.⁴⁹

Our offer to the West Midlands

The Central Motorway Police Group and West Midlands Police Force Traffic Unit provide dedicated and specialist proactive and reactive roads policing above and beyond local policing capability. The operational independence extended to CMPG means the group works collaboratively with Staffordshire Police and West Midlands Police via existing tactical tasking and co-ordination processes, to disrupt and control the threat, risk and harm generated by criminal activity in each force area and in doing so supports individual force resources and priorities. Crucially however, by working closely with the Regional Organised Crime Unit (ROCU), CMPG works across force borders, helping to identify and disrupt regional, national and sometimes international criminal activity.

Roads safety is delivered by CMPG and FTU using intelligence led preventative patrols focused on policing the four recognised contributors to death and serious injury on the roads; speeding, drink / drug driving, distraction e.g. use of mobile telephones and seat belt non-compliance. The group supports National and European roads safety campaigns and aims to educate and instil compliance with roads safety legislation as well as enforce it. The significance of disruption caused to the strategic road network following serious incidents is never to be under-estimated and continuous improvement to working practices and partnerships underpins the delivery of roads safety policing. It is certain that the work done by CMPG and FTU will be invaluable to the people of the West Midlands as we enter the recovery phase of lockdown.

The recently established, Road Harm Prevention Team, works with partner agencies and neighbourhood policing teams to implement solutions aimed at preventing harm across the road network of the West Midlands, and reduce serious and fatal road traffic collisions. The team will work across locations currently or likely to offer high risk of harm to road users, which is supported by an evidence base. The team will look to tackle problems over a short, medium and long term.

Working with the West Midlands Combined Authority, Highways England and other key stakeholders, the team will aim to deliver a significant reduction in KSI collisions involving; pedestrians, cyclists, motorbikes, young driver and their passengers and drivers aged over 26 years. This will be achieved by supporting Multi Agency Road Safety Operations (MARSOs) and other road policing support in areas of high risk to road users, as well as delivery post collision reassurance or supporting force missions. The work of this team will be greatly needed with more vulnerable road users using our roads.

Our ask of government and partners

- We ask of partners that there is a specific joined up approach with policing to ensure that the increased number of vulnerable road users are protected from harm over the recovery period.
- There is a need to increase road safety initiatives over the next 12 months with the increase in traffic on our roads. One source of funding for these initiatives could be through police force retention of fixed penalty speed camera fines, currently fully retained by the treasury. Similarly we would seek that penalties from bus lane and yellow box infringements should be retained locally for provision of further road safety measures as is currently the case in London. We ask that partners support our lobbying to government for these changes.
- Lastly is the awareness that partners can bring to the above issues. Much of the preventative work which can be performed with transport related crime is awareness raising. We ask that partners work with WMP and the OPCC to raise awareness for the above issues through their channels and factor them into their plans over the next 12 months.

Community Restart

In times of crisis communities come together. No greater example of this can be seen than with the Covid crisis. As Britain entered lock down mutual aid groups sprang up across the country.⁵⁰ The formation of more than 4,300 of these hyper local groups has seen more than 3million people connected on issues where they can help their local community. A similar story can be seen with the governments call for NHS Volunteers, which saw 750,000 individuals offer their time to help people across their local areas.⁵¹

People want to help their communities. It is therefore the responsibility of public sector partners to channel this good will into efforts which will ensure greater prosperity for our region.

Our offer to the West Midlands

Following a surge in voluntary and community activity to help vulnerable people during the COVID 19 crisis we have made £200,000 available over the next six months, to support active citizenship within local communities.

In the first tranche, a panel awarded funding to local organisations that have adapted their support to vulnerable citizens, including activities for young people, food distribution combined with telephone and on-line contact, increasing the numbers of volunteers and counsellors, provisions for new mothers, outreach support for those with special needs such as the blind, children with autism etc.

All projects will be signed up to WMNow in order that they can receive neighbourhood policing information and alerts. WMP engagement officers have also reached out to over 300 on line social groups in neighbourhoods to build a digital key individual network incorporating community, voluntary and faith networks. Together, there will be a legacy of a larger, more diverse network of local groups and active citizens through which economic recovery information and advocacy can be communicated into the heart of communities.

A COVID communication strategy for young people by the OPCC has commissioned 2 providers to ensure relevant messaging will better reach young people between May and November.

Our ask of government and partners

- During lock down, due to school closures, our police cadets have had to adopt virtual meet ups to keep communicating. As we enter recovery it is more important than ever that these young people have their energies channelled into positive activities which bring them closer to policing. We ask that partners work with us to locate both channels to recruit cadets but also help us with recruiting cadet leaders. Our ambition is to have 500 cadets by May 2021. The cadet programme also needs support with locating venues for the cadets to meet and inspiring members of the West Midlands public coming to cadet meetings to speak to the young people.
- Similar to our cadet programme is our Junior PCSO programme. This scheme delivers a bespoke training package to every primary school within the West Midlands to promote early engagement with young people, providing confidence and life skills through intervention and prevention activities. This facilitates a partnership working with local schools to empower young people to tackle Community related issues including road safety, bullying, online safety and anti-social behaviour. As we enter recovery these community approaches will be even more important to engaging young people in their communities. We ask that partners work with us to support this programme.
- Similarly is the work of our Special Constables. These volunteers do invaluable work for WMP and it is our ambition to strengthen the Force over the coming months by increasing the number of these valuable volunteers. We need partners support with advertising this as a volunteer opportunity.
- As has been mentioned several times in this report, partners need to pay specific focus to how they occupy young people during this recovery period. Diversionary activities are important for many aspects of crime prevention. We would ask that partners work with us to ensure that young people across the region are occupied and have their energies channelled positively.

Substance Misuse

We are also concerned that the economic effects of Covid could lead to greater substance misuse issues and as result, more alcohol and drug-related crime such as acquisitive crime and alcohol fueled violence.

There are several ways in which financial struggles increase the risk of a person developing a substance use disorder. Poverty increases stress. Stress is well recognized as a risk factor for substance abuse and relapse after treatment. For those struggling to make ends meet, there is a great temptation to turn to drugs or alcohol in an attempt to temporarily escape from their problems.

Economic difficulties also increase feelings of hopelessness and decrease self-esteem. Feeling as though you are powerless over your own future creates a vulnerability to substance abuse. Furthermore, living in a culture that values material possessions and financial success, can make being poor feel like a moral failing. This can lead to feelings of guilt, shame, and diminished self-worth. According to Psychology Today, people struggling with low self-esteem have an increased vulnerability to developing substance use disorders.⁵²

The cost and harm of drug use is already huge in the West Midlands. We know that heroin and crack cocaine users in the West Midlands are estimated to be costing the area at least £1.4bn a year. Moreover half of all burglary, theft, shoplifting and robbery is committed by people who use heroin, crack cocaine or powder cocaine regularly. This represents one in

five crimes reported to West Midlands Police and tens of thousands of victims. There are then the organised crime groups who profit from the drug market. Most organised crime groups in the West Midlands are heavily involved in the drugs trade. Organised criminals in the West Midlands are profiting from a drug market worth approximately £188m. Should drug use go up, as a result of greater economic struggle and unemployment, these costs and crime statistics will only increase, leading to more harm across the force area.

In addition to this, alcohol is known to have a big impact on crime. Data suggests that engaging in prolonged drinking or binge drinking significantly increases your risk of committing violent offences. On average, about 40 percent of inmates who are incarcerated for violent offences were under the influence of alcohol during the time of their crime.⁵³ Though it is important to note substance misuse is not a causal factor for many offences, it can often increase the likelihood of them occurring.

Our offer to the West Midlands

The OPCC offers numerous programmes to help tackle substance abuse and the negative effects that can come from it. Both the Chief Constable and PCC are signed up to a harm reduction policy, in relation to both drugs and alcohol. Our office is looking to roll out a pre-arrest drug diversion scheme more widely, which allows people to attend classes and receive support for any issues they may have, rather than being punished for certain minor offences. Similarly, our office also commissions a custody referral service, which again looks to signpost potential offenders to receive support for any underlying issues they have, rather than simply being punished. We fund a programme in the Black Country, which encourages the use of CSTR orders in courts. These orders provide out of court options for offenders, including treatment for any substance issues. Our office is also working to mitigate against the negative economic impacts, as stated in the above section of this paper.

West Midlands Police should work to implement a harm reduction approach to any drug / alcohol offenders. Utilising out of court disposal options is often preferential to short term custodial sentences. They allow the root cause of any issues to be dealt with, including substance abuse issues, which is often a lot more effective at preventing re-offending and further issues, than a traditional enforcement approach.

Our ask of government and partners

- Should substance abuse issues increase, appropriate drug and alcohol support services must be on offer. Organisations should anticipate a potential increase in demand. This needs to be a focus for both local partners and government.

Appendices

Appendix 1:

18-24 unemployment estimates

In their report, the Resolution Foundation reference an [OBR unemployment rate](#) (16-64) forecast of 10% for Q2 2020 which is up 157% from the 3.9 per cent rate that prevailed in Q2 2019.

Resolution Foundation note that over the course of the financial crises increases in unemployment rates for 18-24 years olds saw relative increases similar to that seen overall. Using this, they applied the 157% increase forecasted overall to the unemployment rate of 18-24 year olds to estimate the additional 640,000 young people nationally experiencing unemployment due the pandemic.

A similar methodology was applied locally, pulling the unemployment rate for 18-24 year olds within the West Midlands (Met County) from the annual population survey for June 2019 (12 months up to) and applying a 157% increase.

A stage breakdown for the calculations:

- Number employed = 162,300
- Number unemployed = 28,300
- Economically active (employed + unemployed) = 190,600
- Unemployment rate (unemployed/(economically active)) = 14.84%
- Unemployment rate (157% increase) = 38.16%
- Additional number of 18-24 year olds unemployed = 44,431

Due to a number of shortfalls in adopting the estimation method used by the Resolution Foundation and applying it locally a plus/minus 10,000 error margin was used for the final estimate statement:

35,000 to 45,000 additional 18-24 year olds unemployed but could in reality see much more if we see a depression and an especially high impact on elementary jobs

Annual population survey data is available for extraction from nomisweb.co.uk

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