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Policing in the pandemic - The police response to the coronavirus pandemic during 2020

On 20th April 2021, Her Majesty's Inspectorate of Constabulary and Fire & Rescue Services (HMICFRS) published a report on the police response to the coronavirus pandemic during 2020.

As was noted in the press release, demand on policing changed during the first lockdown with decreased theft and robbery offences but an increased need to support the work of other frontline services whilst enforcing lockdown restrictions¹. However, this change has continued throughout 2020 and into 2021 with the demands and challenges facing the police service being substantial.

Despite theft offences being considerably down, recorded crime for 2020/21 saw an increase on 2019/20, driven by increases in low-level violence, domestic violence and stalking and harassment offences. In addition, by summer 2021 it is anticipated that the usual seasonal pattern of crime will have resumed and WMP will be entering a period of summer demand, which will see a further increase in violence and antisocial behaviour.

Whilst it is welcomed that the main finding from the report was that overall the police service responded well to the challenge of policing the COVID-19 pandemic, it should be acknowledged that the impacts of the pandemic will continue to impact the police service over the coming years.

¹ [HMICFRS \(2021\) Police generally responded well to exceptional circumstances of pandemic](#)

The report outlined five recommendations to police forces, the remainder of the response will focus on these.

Recommendation 1: Managing registered sex offenders

- Forces must immediately make sure that officers understand and correctly implement the guidance for managing registered sex offenders during the pandemic.

Throughout the Covid-19 pandemic, interim guidance has been issued to sex offender management teams within West Midlands Police on how to manage registered sex offenders and their risks within an environment of potentially reduced staffing.

Several offender management scenarios were operationalised which would change dependent on abstraction rates and ability to manage risk. These were reviewed during a recent audit of sex offender managements; the audit received reasonable assurance that there is a good framework of control in place and that the majority of controls are being consistently applied to ensure effective risk management.

Recommendation 2: Legislation and guidance

- Forces must immediately make sure they can manage their responses to changes in coronavirus-related legislation. They must ensure frontline officers and staff are clear about the difference between legislation and guidance.

Early on, West Midlands Police's Go-to-app was updated to include a section on Covid-19 with information relating to Covid-19 news, guidance, legislation and questions and answers. This application is accessible via the intranet and mobility devices, and is reviewed/updated in line with government guidance/legislation.

A Direction to Leave (DTL) application was produced by West Midlands Police which enabled the recording of actions/dispersals relating to Covid-19 legislation breaches. Combining this with the Business Insights application gives neighbourhood policing units' detailed information on who is being dispersed, from where, and for what reason.

A regional campaign was run which reminded members of the public that victim services remain available to them regardless of Covid-19. It also reminded victims of their rights to safety and support regardless of the Covid-19 legislation and tells them how to access the support. The campaign sought unique ways of getting the message to the most isolated victims who may not be leaving the home often and in some cases may not leave the home at all, with the aim being to make reporting and finding information quicker, easier and more accessible both for victims, and for community members trying to support them.

Recommendation 3: Test, track and trace

- Forces must immediately put in place a policy to make sure that they follow the guidance and self-isolation directions when members of the workforce come into contact with someone with coronavirus symptoms.

Early on, as part of the Covid-19 emergency update of the Police and Crime Plan, West Midlands Police were asked to monitor and report on personal protective equipment, Covid-19 testing, sickness, absence and self-isolation data.

The decision was taken to purchase PPE ahead of the national PPE project and West Midlands Police were able to provide face coverings and hand sanitiser to all staff and officers who travel to and from work on public transport from day 1 of the government mandate to use them. The PPE supply chain is kept under continual review and acted upon changes to legislation in order to increase PPE stock/widen PPE availability where government legislation meant that they were now required.

As a result of the pandemic and government advice, there have been a number of colleagues working from home during the pandemic. In the main these have been colleagues who are not in operational roles, however in some cases, for example for operational colleagues who are shielding or vulnerable, the Force has responded creatively to adjust the service offer to allow more to be delivered virtually. An example being colleagues from Force Response using laptops to deal with incidents reported by members of the public

A number of dedicated contact teams were launched utilising trained and clinical colleagues to support the organisation, ranging from COVID-19 support such as testing referrals and results service for colleagues who had come into contact with someone with Covid-19 symptoms or were displaying symptoms themselves, to support and guidance for shielding colleagues and those required to self-isolate. This was led by the occupational health team communicating the updated government and Public Health England (PHE) guidance where necessary, and supporting colleagues with applying this practically to their own personal circumstances.

Recommendation 4: Custody records

- Forces must immediately make sure that they clearly and consistently record on custody records information about how/when/if detainees are informed of the temporary changes to how they can exercise their rights to legal advice and representation. The record must make clear how any consents are obtained about the way in which legal advice and representation are provided.

The WMP2020 Change Programme commenced in 2014 and set out a clear plan to deliver a more responsive, preventative, sustainable, efficient and affordable operating model, able to adapt to the challenges of policing in 2020. Some of the key projects implemented include mobility devices, new ways of public contact, new ways of responding, and data programmes/data driven insights.

This long-term investment in technology and business process change has aided West Midlands Police's ability to monitor/respond to the demand level and the increased complexity of the custody suites.

Within the next Connect platform, along with the previous ICIS platform, the ways in which detainees receive their legal rights are recorded within a specific section of the digital custody record.

In addition, custody performance metrics around travel time (arrest to arrival at custody), waiting time (arrival at custody to custody record creation), detention length (detention authorisation to release/bail), and the use of bail and released under investigation are recorded and monitored on a regular basis

Recommendation 5: Overall scale and impact of changes

- Within six months, forces must assess the sustainability of any temporary measures introduced during the pandemic that change the way they work. They must understand positive, negative and unintended consequences of the scale and impact of the changes before determining if any of these new ways of working should continue.

As part of the ongoing internal audit strategy and work programme, there is a particular focus on the organisational learning from the Covid-19 pandemic. The audit will focus on the outcomes and learning from the HMICFRS inspections and how West Midlands Police are taking forward the recommendations.

The review will also consider the robustness of new practices that have been adopted by the Force during the Covid-19 pandemic as part of business as usual along with any unintended consequences of new ways of working such as the custody capacity issues and additional tasks for custody staff in relation to Virtual Remand Hearings where prisoners who usually would have been taken to court remain in custody blocks and have their case heard via live link.