

PEEL 2023–2025: An inspection of West Midlands Police. Response from Simon Foster, West Midlands Police and Crime Commissioner.

Introduction

On 22 December 2023, the inspection report relating to West Midlands Police (WMP), for the period 2023-25 was published by His Majesty’s Inspectorate of Constabulary and Fire & Rescue Services (HMICFRS). The performance of WMP was assessed across eight policing areas, as illustrated in *Figure 1*. The outcome of the assessment was that the force received an 'adequate' rating in two areas, 'requires improvement' in three areas, and 'inadequate' in the remaining three areas.

HMICFRS identified inadequate performance in the areas of crime investigation, offender management, and protection of vulnerable individuals. Adequate areas included police powers, public treatment and preventing crime. Ahead of the 2023-25 PEEL report's publication, HMICFRS took the decision to Engage WMP, highlighting four causes of concern. As part of my commitment to ensure accountability, the Engage concerns have become a standing agenda item, during weekly meetings with the Chief Constable, where we closely monitor progress. The concerns are a standing agenda item for discussion during the monthly meetings of the Strategic Policing and Crime Board, illustrating a commitment to transparency with the public.

Outstanding	Good	Adequate	Requires improvement	Inadequate
		Preventing crime	Responding to the public	Investigating crime
		Police powers and public treatment	Developing a positive workplace	Protecting vulnerable people
			Leadership and force management	Managing offenders

Figure 1 – PEEL 2023-25 West Midlands Police Graded Judgments

I have consistently raised issues with the government, regarding the adverse consequences stemming from its ill-considered budget cuts directed towards WMP. These reductions in funding have inflicted serious damage on the force, frequently imposing substantial constraints on the committed and dedicated police

officers and staff operating in the West Midlands. The resultant strain has imposed significant pressure on WMP, impacting not only its personnel, but also adversely affecting the residents of the region. The tangible repercussions of these budgetary decisions extend well beyond mere financial considerations, permeating the fabric of communities and the effectiveness and efficiency of policing in the West Midlands.

Despite the so-called police uplift, WMP finds itself with 800 fewer officers and 500 fewer PCSOs than it had in 2010. The failure to implement the national funding formula, incurs an annual cost of £40 million for WMP, comparable to the staffing equivalent of 800 police officers. This fiscal year, we received the fifth least favourable percentage in the national funding settlement. In 2023/24 WMP had to manage a budget deficit of £28 million, in order to be able to set a balanced budget and was facing a budget deficit of £27 million in the financial year 2024/25.

These financial challenges have had a serious adverse impact on police visibility, response times, the conduct of investigations, the rights and welfare of victims, community safety and the ability of WMP to prevent, tackle and reduce crime and safeguard the vulnerable. The people of the West Midlands have borne the brunt of these consequences, with hardworking officers and staff left to pick up the pieces. HMICFRS's decision to Engage WMP is yet further evidence of the harm inflicted by the government on both the police force and the residents of the West Midlands. I therefore welcome the commentary from His Majesty's Inspector, which concluded, 'West Midlands Police needs to have enough resources to prevent crime and protect the public effectively'.

I am treating this matter with the utmost seriousness and as a top priority. My aim is to ensure that the residents of the West Midlands, receive the service from WMP to which they are entitled.

The causes of concern identified in PEEL are as follows:

Investigating Crime

This cause of concern relates to the quality of investigations, with HMICFRS stating that WMP is not carrying out effective investigations, which lead to satisfactory results for victims. The inspectorate acknowledged that more complex investigations are generally handled effectively. However, the concern centres primarily around volume investigations. This concern is based on a review of one hundred cases, encompassing various offences such as assaults, neighbourhood crimes, rapes, sexual offences, domestic abuse, stalking, and harassment.

The findings revealed that many officers and staff lacked the experience or confidence to investigate offences, particularly among probationary officers or those who had not been involved in investigations for

some time. Additionally, supervisors were observed stockpiling cases in holding accounts, rather than allocating to individual officers.

HMICFRS assessed this to be a failure to deliver appropriate outcomes for victims. HMICFRS cited data from the year ending March 2023, indicating a charge rate of 2.7% and an overall rate of 3.6%, when factoring in out-of-court resolutions. WMP had already implemented a new operating model in April 2023, attributing the lack of investigative capacity outside central directorates as a key problem.

The new local policing model involves sharing volume investigations across a broader range of teams. In response to HMICFRS feedback, the force-initiated Operation Vanguard, tasked with improving technical knowledge, standards, and policies within investigations. These standards are now enforced through a more robust performance framework, featuring weekly reporting on Key Performance Indicators (KPIs), broken down by force area and department.

In addition, WMP have visited police forces who the inspectorate considers to be good at investigating crime, in order to identify best practices which can then be implemented in WMP. One example of best practice implemented so far in WMP, is the deployment of the Quality Assessment Thematic Tool (QATT). The QATT constitutes a comprehensive evaluation, covering various facets of an investigation, encompassing victim-centric approaches, suspect management, investigation standards, and supervisor reviews.

In terms of governance, each Chief Inspector and Inspector assigned investigative responsibilities are required to conduct ten QATT assessments per month. Of these, seven pertain to their respective areas of responsibility, while three are conducted for other areas to uphold transparency. To date, over 1,500 QATT assessments have been successfully completed. The QATT findings are routinely reported in WMP performance meetings. The QATT results have played a crucial role in establishing a performance baseline, ensuring the accuracy of the question set, and pinpointing areas that require focused attention.

Current observations indicate improvements in key areas. Performance measures which enable monitoring include volume of open crime, unallocated crime, pending supervisor reviews for investigations, and crime outcomes. For instance, the current statistical representation of open crime amounts to approximately 31,000 records, less than 10% of the tally of recorded annual crime.

This improvement in open crime proportion, aligns with comparable rates observed in other forces, operating within our Most Similar Groups (MSG). The quantity of unallocated crime records is consistently diminishing, currently standing at nearly half of its September 2023 levels. The ongoing efforts of Operation

Vanguard are expected to contribute to a further reduction in the time taken for case allocation, enhancing overall efficiency.

Further to this, the number of investigations awaiting a supervisor review have reduced by almost a third since September 2023. The crime recording system used by WMP is now equipped with alerts that activate to signal the necessity for conducting supervisor reviews. Additionally, the investigations section of the system facilitates the completion of an investigations template, ensuring uniformity, and enabling the tracking and monitoring of investigation plans. These are valuable additions to the crime recording system, which are already aiding to the improvements in performance.

When analysing crime outcome rates, the inspectorate observed that only 3.6% of outcomes were categorised as 'offenders brought to justice'. According to the latest data from WMP, encompassing the year-to-date period for the fiscal year 2023/24, this figure has risen to 6.1%. This represents a significant increase in outcomes and I anticipate that more efficient investigative procedures will further contribute to an increased proportion of offenders being brought to justice.

Protecting Vulnerable People

The protecting vulnerable people cause of concern relates to Multi-Agency Risk Assessment Conferences (MARACs). The inspectorate noted that WMP was not making sure MARACs work effectively to keep vulnerable people safe. MARAC constitutes a regularly convened local meeting, where representatives from various agencies collaborate, to assist individuals at a heightened risk of domestic abuse and exchange relevant information.

There are eight MARACs that convene regularly, each corresponding to one of the seven Local Policing Areas. Coordinators provide support for these meetings and the MARACs adhere to established arrangements for information sharing, guided by an operational protocol and a framework focusing on performance and quality. A new Vulnerability Superintendent position has also been established in WMP.

It is important to highlight that the MARAC process serves as an additional safeguarding measure in collaboration with partners, specifically for high-risk cases. Even in the absence of MARACs, these cases still undergo safeguarding procedures applied to all domestic abuse cases. To address the performance issues related to this concern, WMP launched Operation Willowbay to explore options for improvement.

This initiative involved examining best proactive practices across police forces in England and Wales. It led to the formulation of interim guidance that incorporates the identified best practices, especially concerning the criteria for accepting high-risk referrals into MARACs. Additionally, measures for tolerance, along with the creation of trigger plans, are being developed to enhance monitoring.

The PEEL inspection revealed an unacceptable backlog of six to eight weeks, for high-risk cases awaiting a MARAC. As a result of recent implemented improvements, each Local Policing Area (LPA) now has a waiting period of between two and three weeks, together with a decrease in demand concerning the total cases awaiting a MARAC. Safer Lives, an initiative to support victims, currently has a target of four weeks. This has led to more efficient processes and improved overall performance.

Moreover, a WMP analyst has been tasked with collaborating alongside the MARAC team, to facilitate the development of structure and service level proposals which I will approve. Notably, established partnership meetings within each LPA, already incorporate MARAC as a recurring agenda item within the Domestic Abuse Strategic Group.

There are plans to establish two additional boards aimed at fortifying governance related to MARACs during the early stages of 2024. These boards include the MARAC Strategic Governance Board, with oversight by the Office of the Police and Crime Commissioner, and the Regional MARAC Operational Group, chaired by the regional MARAC lead.

These strategic developments are anticipated to contribute to the effective coordination and management of MARAC initiatives across the region. I have since agreed further funding to support MARACs and I will continue to oversee performance to prevent the recurrence of any unnecessary backlogs across the region.

Managing Offenders

The concerns regarding the management of offenders have two main aspects. Firstly, HMICFRS has asserted that WMP is inadequately handling the risk posed to the public by registered sex offenders. Secondly, the inspectorate identified a lack of effective management of the risk presented by online child abuse offenders.

Significant concerns were raised regarding sex offender managers, particularly the backlog of overdue Active Risk Management System (ARMS) assessments, delayed visits, and outstanding Risk Management Plans (RMPs). The ARMS assessments consider prior offending and historical indicators, with risk elements that can evolve over time such as employment status, substance abuse, and access to potential victims.

Visits, scheduled at varying frequencies throughout the year based on offender risk levels, enable ongoing monitoring. The RMPs necessitate periodic reviews and updates in response to both ARMS assessments and visits. Additionally, HMICFRS highlighted worries about inadequate staffing levels and the historical lack of access to crucial management information, that could have exposed these aforementioned backlogs.

When examining the risk posed to the public by registered sex offenders, Operation Rosaria was established to tackle the necessary enhancements within Sex Offender Management (SOMs). In conjunction with the alterations to the force operating model in April 2023, LPA ownership of SOMs transitioned to the Public

Protection Unit. Investment has been made to increase staff numbers, with an approved addition of two sergeants and twelve officers, specifically allocated for the supervision of registered sex offenders.

As the recruitment process is ongoing, overtime is currently being employed to ensure effective management of demand. Following regular accountability meetings with the Chief Constable, WMP has acted promptly to implement an improvement plan, aimed at addressing issues related to demand, welfare, and training.

Recent performance statistics have showed significant reductions in outstanding ARMs, Visits and RMPs in comparison to data informing the PEEL findings. The force is also actively assessing the well-being support provided to sex offender managers. These proactive measures represent positive developments and I will closely monitor the force's progress.

Regarding the efforts of the Online Child Sexual Exploitation Team (OCSET), who are responsible for identifying individuals involved in the online consumption of indecent images of children and implementing safeguarding measures, there have been improvements in their function. The OCSET team receives their caseload from the National Crime Agency upon identification of an Internet Protocol address downloading illegal content.

Subsequently, the team is required to gather intelligence to identify a suspect and address before initiating enforcement action. At the time of the inspection, there were 81 cases awaiting enforcement. Further to this, HMICFRS expressed concern about the absence of a procedure to notify social services of safeguarding concerns, when a new case is initiated.

When examining the analysis of digital evidence, the inspectorate highlighted that timeliness for the Digital Forensics Unit, to examine devices and return any evidence to support an investigation, was taking too long and creating backlogs.

I am pleased to report that investment in OCSET, means one additional sergeant will be recruited to support growth in capacity. Recent performance statistics illustrate that there are around 13 cases weekly, which is favourable in comparison to other police forces in England and Wales. The Digital Forensics Unit has successfully reduced the count of unallocated cases from 400 to 100, indicating a notable improvement. In addition, there are now Service Level Agreements (SLA) in place to ensure that the processing of evidence aligns with the risk level of each case.

The inspectorate noted that WMP was not utilising the Child Abuse Image Database (CAID) to an appropriate level. At the moment, WMP has significantly increased its engagement with CAID and currently ranks fourth in the number of submissions made to the database. Performance analysts will persist in

scrutinising data related to offender management and this data is reviewed on a weekly basis, to ensure that WMP is meeting performance expectations and aligning with improvement plans.

Responding to the Public

An area for improvement which was highlighted in the PEEL inspection, was the poor service levels for emergency calls, citing 2022/23 data which detailed that WMP answered 75.2% of 999 calls from the public within 10 seconds. At the commencement of 2023, the performance of public contact with WMP, via 999 and 101 services, fell short of the agreed-upon service requirements outlined in the SLA.

The SLA states that 90% of 999 calls should be answered within 10 seconds and 90% of 101 calls should be answered in 3 minutes. In January 2023, the 999 call SLA was at 84.9%, while the SLA for 101 calls was a mere 30.4%. It is important to appreciate that, WMP face a heightened demand for its services, compared to Police Scotland and the majority of other police forces across England and Wales.

Significant transformation to the Force Contact structure and the strategic allocation of resources, yielded consistent and positive impacts on public contact responses throughout 2023. By December of the same year, there was a remarkable improvement, with the 999 SLA reaching an impressive 95.8%, and the 101 SLA standing at 91.0%.

In recent comparisons across all police forces, WMP has consistently ranked in the upper quartile for 999 calls. Consequently, the challenge of inadequate wait times in public contact has been effectively addressed, through substantial enhancements in performance. I remain committed to monitoring public contact issues and assisting the Chief Constable, to ensure that the people of the West Midlands receive the service they are entitled to.

HMICFRS also noted that WMP needed to respond to incidents in a timely manner. In 2023, the total number of incidents recorded by WMP across all priority levels reached 751,374, marking a substantial 14.3% increase in demand compared to 2022. As part of the decentralisation of force response teams within the new operational model, the primary objective was to enhance response times, particularly for Priority 1 (P1) and Priority 2 (P2) incidents.

The existing SLA sets a 15-minute target for P1 incidents and a 1-hour target for P2 incidents. In January 2023, the median response time for P1 was 13 minutes and 26 seconds, while P2's median response time stood at 1 hour and 40 minutes. An evaluation of the December 2023 performance reveals improvements, as P1 incidents now receive responses within 15 minutes or less, with a median response time of 11 minutes and 54 seconds. Moreover, P2 incidents are resolved within an hour, with a median response time of 59 minutes and 3 seconds.

The implementation of the new operating model, emphasising the functions of local policing teams, has effectively translated into better performing incident response for the residents of the West Midlands. Continuous monitoring of response times remains a crucial aspect, to ensure accountability in ongoing performance.

Summary

I have consistently held WMP to account and I will continue to do so. I am committed to collaborating with HMICFRS and all relevant partners, to take the required action to address the 4 causes of concern. I have regularly reported to the Police and Crime Panel together with WMP on 18 December 2023, 15 January 2024 and 5 February 2024, to provide updates on PEEL findings and address any requests for further information or questions from panel members. In addition, I attended the Police Performance Oversight Group (PPOG) meeting held on 16 January 2024, which oversees the performance monitoring of WMP, whilst it is in Engage.

It is important to recognise that the decision to Engage WMP is based on PEEL data that ranges from 8 to 15 months old, predating the introduction of the new operating model on 3 April 2023. In many respects, the decision reflects the position at that time, rather than the current reality. The inspection is already significantly outdated, due to the rapid proactive measures that have been taken or are currently underway. Despite the many challenges faced by WMP, both the Chief Constable and I have implemented substantial improvements in key areas, including the following:

The performance of the 999 and 101 service has been transformed and is now one of the best in the country. In particular, 90% of 999 calls are being answered in under 10 seconds. The average time to answer a call is 6 seconds. The abandonment rate is 0.1%.

There have been improvements in emergency response times; the number of arrests being carried out, are up from about 3,200 a month to about 4,200 a month; the number of outstanding suspects has reduced from over 10,000 to around 7,500; detections and positive outcome rates have tripled in recent months from about 3% to about 9%; and force level data is evidencing that total recorded crime has fallen year on year by nearly 9%. WMP now have as good, if not better outcome rates for burglaries, robberies and homicides than similar forces, such as Greater Manchester, Merseyside and West Yorkshire; and WMP has high compliance against the National Crime Recording Standard together with crime reductions, the highest volume in England and Wales.

I emphasise that I am treating the PEEL inspection report and Engage, with the utmost seriousness and I consider it to be a top priority. I am committed to holding WMP to account and working with the Chief

Constable and in partnership with HMICFRS, the Police and Crime Panel and other relevant partners, to urgently address the causes of concern and resolve the areas for improvement, so as to ensure the people of the West Midlands receive the service from WMP, that they are entitled to.

Yours faithfully,

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read 'Simon Foster', written in a cursive style.

Simon Foster

West Midlands Police and Crime Commissioner