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State of Policing: The Annual Assessment of Policing in England and Wales 2023. Response from Simon Foster, West Midlands Police and Crime Commissioner.

His Majesty's Inspectorate of Constabulary and Fire and Rescue Services (HMICFRS), released its annual assessment of policing on 19 July 2024. The report offers an independent evaluation of the efficiency and effectiveness of policing across England and Wales. It is based on prior inspections and views from Police and Crime Commissioners and Chief Constables. The assessment scrutinises various aspects of police performance, including operational practices, resource management and service delivery, to determine how well police forces are fulfilling their responsibilities and serving the public. The findings are intended to provide valuable insights, highlighting strengths and identifying areas for progress.

Restoring Public Trust and Confidence

The inspectorate has noted a recent decline in public trust and confidence in the police, with widespread concerns that the police are not performing effectively. Enhancing public confidence, is a key priority in the current Police and Crime Plan for West Midlands Police (WMP). Following the publication of the Baroness Casey report, on the culture within the Metropolitan Police Service (MPS), I organised a well-attended Public Accountability Forum, over the summer of 2023. This forum provided an opportunity for community representatives to highlight specific issues, engage in frank discussions, share their experiences and explore solutions with the Chief Constable and myself.

WMP has been developing an effective engagement strategy, tailored to diverse communities to ensure their voices are heard and influence policing. Events in January and February 2024, including national and local Police Race Action Plan events, were held to raise awareness and gather feedback from communities.

The year-long #LetsTalkAboutPolicing campaign, also aimed to enhance WMP's ethnic-minority representation, through engagement sessions and recruitment initiatives. Since 2019, Force representation has increased by 5%, and ongoing engagement efforts, are expected to further enhance the recruitment of a diverse workforce, improving public satisfaction and confidence.

The Force remains committed to engaging with community scrutiny panels that oversee various police powers, including stop and search and strip searching. These panels, chaired by community members and attended by additional community representatives, force personnel and Office of the Police and Crime Commissioner (OPCC) staff, play a crucial role in maintaining transparency and accountability. Over the past 12-months year, the panels have significantly increased the participation of young people, including people with first-hand experience of being stopped and searched, to enhance trust and confidence in policing.

Community policing is of central importance. Enhancing police visibility and engagement is necessary, for effectively addressing local concerns and fostering trust within communities. Recognising the importance of these elements, WMP established a new operating model in April 2023, that emphasises the localisation of policing efforts. This model aims to improve service delivery, by tailoring responses to the specific needs of different communities and optimising the allocation of resources.

The new operating model underlines the significance of community policing, in strengthening the relationship between the police and the public. By increasing the presence of officers within local areas and encouraging proactive interaction with residents, WMP seeks to build stronger, more trusting relationships with the community. This approach not only addresses immediate local issues, but also plays a crucial role in crime prevention, by fostering greater cooperation and communication between the police and public. Moving forward, rebuilding community policing will be a key priority in my new Police and Crime Plan for WMP, along with deepening the local understanding of trust and confidence across the region.

Providing a Service to Victims and the Most Vulnerable

Public confidence is also shaped, by the experiences of victims interacting with the police. The assessment underscores, that many victims continue to feel disillusioned with both the police and the broader criminal justice system. Recently, WMP has launched a comprehensive Victims Strategy, which is backed by a detailed delivery plan and overseen by the Victims Thematic Board. This strategy, aims to address the gaps identified in victim support and ensure a more effective and compassionate response. I also commission a wide range of victim support services, to ensure victims needs are met.

To strengthen the approach, WMP have launched an internal campaign, designed to reinforce the roles and responsibilities of officers and staff in supporting victims, in accordance with the Victims Code. This initiative, includes clear guidance on how to handle victim interactions and provide the necessary support. Additionally, mandatory training on the Victims Code, has been implemented across the force. This training

ensures that all staff members are well-equipped with the knowledge and skills needed, to deliver a high-quality service and to treat victims with the respect, understanding and sensitivity they are entitled to.

Moreover, I am in the process of recruiting a dedicated victim's advocate. This role will focus on overseeing compliance with the Victims Code and rigorously scrutinising WMP's performance in this critical area. The advocate, will provide an independent review of our practices and ensure that we meet the highest standards of victim care, aiming to build and enhance public trust and confidence in our services.

Setting Up the Workforce for Success

The Inspectorate has acknowledged the Police Uplift Programme (PUP), in increasing the number of police officers. Despite the progress, WMP is still facing a shortfall of 800 fewer police officers and 500 fewer PCSOs, when compared to 2010.

To continue to address this gap in part, the Force is actively working to recruit 96 new Police Community Support Officers (PCSOs), before the end of March next year. PCSOs play a crucial role in community engagement and crime prevention, serving as a bridge between the police and the local community. Initiatives, such as the community wall mural project in Coventry, that worked with the city's street homeless, are designed to foster stronger relationships with young people and enhance, community trust through PCSOs.

In addition to recruitment, WMP is committed to retaining its current workforce. The newly introduced Stay and Listen Service, is a key initiative aimed at improving staff retention. This service focuses on addressing staff concerns and finding practical solutions, to retain valued employees. By prioritising staff wellbeing and ensuring that colleagues feel valued and heard, the Stay and Listen Service, seeks to create a supportive work environment, that enhances job satisfaction and reduces turnover. These combined efforts in recruitment and retention, are vital for building a diverse, effective workforce and maintaining high levels of public satisfaction and trust.

Funding the Police

The assessment raises significant concerns about police funding, highlighting that the current allocation formula is outdated and fails to meet the needs of police forces effectively. Despite WMP being the second highest force, in terms of emergency call demand, it continues to face substantial underfunding. This financial shortfall, has impeded investment in essential assets such as station renovations, information technology systems and vehicles, which are crucial for operational efficiency and service quality.

The existing funding formula, based on statistics that are now over a decade old, is clearly inadequate and unfit for purpose. This out-of-date approach, to calculating police funding is detrimental to WMP and has broader implications, for police forces across England and Wales. The outdated data, fails to reflect the current demands and challenges faced by police forces, particularly in high-growth and high-crime areas, like the West Midlands. To address these issues, it is imperative that a revised funding formula, ensures fair and equitable funding.

The West Midlands has experienced a substantial population increase of 6% from 2013 to 2022, outpacing the national average. This demographic growth, is happening in a region that is also facing significant socio-economic pressures.

Whilst the inspectorate acknowledges the financial pressures on police forces, it also points out that performance discrepancies, stem from management issues. Even well-funded forces can deliver subpar services, if management practices are inefficient. Therefore, it is crucial for WMP, to not only secure equitable funding, but also focus on improving management practices, to enhance overall service delivery and effectiveness.

Summary

Overall, I welcome the findings of the annual assessment of policing in England and Wales. It is important that work continues at pace, to ensure effective implementation of strategies to restore public trust, enhance service delivery to victims, optimise resource management and improve police performance.

I am committed, to scrutinising and holding the Chief Constable accountable, to ensure WMP is performing to its best capabilities, as this is essential for driving continuous improvement and ensuring, that the Force meets its obligations, to the West Midlands people, efficiently and effectively.

Yours faithfully,



Simon Foster

West Midlands Police and Crime Commissioner