

PCC Question and Answers

Actions:

Dorset Force's performance against others in the Soteria project and any learning from the outcomes (PCC);

I provided an extensive overview of the current position of Operation Soteria within Dorset at our last meeting in July and, Chair, I concluded that conviction rates for RASSO are nationally very low, and no PCC nor Chief Constable would say anything other than they wish to see many more perpetrators brought to justice.

I went on to say that there are early signs that indicate some progress for Soteria forces (whether that be more timely charging decisions, or better file quality, alongside some slightly improved outcome rates), but we must recognise that this is a complex issue and RASSO cases can take many years to work through the CJS, so it may be some time before we fully understand the benefits of this work and, of course, we will keep members informed.

Two and a half months on from my last update Chair, that position is unchanged, and therefore it will still be some time before we have definitive news to share. However, both Dorset Police and my office continue to be engaged with the Soteria process and are taking advantage of the peer-to-peer learning groups which are led by other Forces who are further along the process and continue to provide helpful insight into its delivery.

In Quarter Questions

The Home Secretary has stated that the Police must investigate every theft and not ignore shoplifting, stolen cars, bikes or 'phones. New guidelines compel officers to pursue every offence where there is a "reasonable line of enquiry". The PCP has three questions that fall out of this policy:

- How will the PCC hold the Chief Constable to account for the delivery of this policy?
- How will the PCC report to the PCP the progress/success of this policy?
- What is the PCC's view that the NPCC has stated that this policy encroaches into the Chief Constable's operational independence?

With respect to the first question, the Home Office, National Police Chiefs Council and the College of Policing agreed the wording of this commitment prior to its public release, and the matter of what a 'reasonable line of inquiry' is, has now been operationalised by the College in their updated guidance – issued to Forces as the 'Investigation process: Authorised Professional Practice', or investigation APP.

The APP instructs police officers to follow all reasonable lines of enquiry when investigating an offence, meaning all material and potential evidence should be considered when there is information to suggest the offender could be identified. For example:

- where there is clear recorded CCTV (or other) footage, police will recover that and seek to present it as evidence,
- when there is clear eyewitness evidence, that person will be interviewed,
- where there is strong evidence and forensic opportunities, police will seek to present these, and
- where property is stolen with unique features, such as a serial number, police will seek to recover it and obtain evidence.

It is this detail that I will rely on to hold the Chief Constable to account.

With regards to question two, as per the previous commitment to attend all domestic burglaries, where I provided subsequent assurance to the Panel that all such crimes were being attended, I suggest that in time, once the data are confirmed, I would seek to offer the same verbal assurance.

As for the third question, yes, the NPCC Chair wrote an open letter to the Home Secretary and Policing Minister on this matter, and stated that – and I quote:

“However, growing demand as well as the increasing and changing nature of crime means consistency across forces varies and approximately 21 of 43 forces still have less officers than in 2010. It is therefore right that Police Chiefs have operational independence and are responsible for making difficult decisions around how best to respond to the breadth of priorities of local communities.”

Dorset is one of the forces to whom the NPCC chair refers, and I concur with the position that Chief Constables should continue to be afforded operational independence.

The Home Secretary plans to transfer the authority to have the final say on Police Officer dismissals, due to misconduct, back to the Chief Constable. As the electorate's Dorset policing representative, can the PCC please give an outline on how this will work and what measures he will put in place in order to ensure that his Office oversees the transparency, openness and "above reproach" of this process?

This is quite a complex matter, and my team and I will therefore rely on the national guidance once it is issued. I am therefore not in a position yet to offer an answer on how this will work, and what I will put in place to ensure its effectiveness. I will, of course, endeavour to update the Panel once the national guidance is available.

That said, I am happy to set out a high level what some of the complicating factors are:

Firstly, without wishing to give anyone a history lesson, it is helpful to remind ourselves that following a public consultation led by the Home Secretary in the autumn of 2014, changes were made to the police disciplinary system for the purposes of more transparency, independence, and justice. These included holding police misconduct hearings in public (from May 2015) and replacing Chief Police Officers who chaired hearings with Legally Qualified Chairs (LQC) from January 2016. The role and responsibilities of the LQC have been subsequently strengthened in the 2020 regulations. This proposal therefore unpicks the previous decision.

Secondly, there have been assertions that the introduction of legally qualified chairs led to less robust outcomes being applied to policing. The Home Office misconduct review, published earlier this month, does not support that – stating, and I quote:

"The review has found no evidence that dismissal levels are decreasing at misconduct hearings since the year ending 31 March 2016. Data analysis shown in... the tables accompanying this report indicates that, the overall number of officers dismissed has been on an upwards trajectory in recent years [and]... The year ending 31 March 2022 saw the highest number of officers dismissed in a year."

Thirdly, it is fair to say that this issue does not affect all forces. Whilst the Met appears to be of endemic concern, with the Commissioner stating that hundreds of serving officers should not be in post, and that radical changes are needed to address this, this is simply not the experience of other forces. Here in Dorset, we have no misconduct cases that are yet to be convened, and there is no waitlist or delay with identifying suitable independent misconduct panel members, or a legally qualified chair to facilitate the process. This does therefore feel like the changes are being driven at the behest of one force.

Fourthly and finally then, is the suggestion that this plan will result in Chief Constables chairing police dismissals processes. The emerging position is that this change is unlikely to result in Chief Constables themselves chairing misconduct panels, as the Home Office is recommending that misconduct hearing panels should now be chaired by senior police officers, supported by a legally qualified panel member and independent panel member.

As I say though, Chair, this is still emerging policy, and so I will wait until the detail and the guidance are clearer before I make further comment.

Quarterly Report

Priority One - Cut Crime and Anti-Social Behaviour

Can the PCC provide an update on the work he has initiated to alleviate any road safety issues relating to e-scooter use?

Dorset continues to see the illegal use of e-scooters, which of course, raises concerns for the safety of all road users, including the e-scooter rider.

I am clear that those people who persist in recklessly using private devices on our pavements and roads are breaking the law and risk prosecution – and that's why I will continue to issue robust reminders to the public about e-scooter use and I will continue to raise community concerns with Chief Officers.

I fully supported the Force's approach to publicity, engagement, and enforcement of illegal e-scooter use. The Force issue regular warnings to e-scooter riders via media channels to ensure that people are aware of when and where they can and cannot use e-scooters. The Dorset Road Safe team also continue to deal with reports of e-scooter misuse and more than 100 e-scooters have been seized since the beginning of 2022.

Chair, I will continue to highlight this issue and, along with other Police and Crime Commissioners, I will continue to lobby the Home Office and Department of Transport to strengthen the legislation around the use of e-scooters too.

How does the Community Speed Watch Team provide value for money when 97% of drivers are obeying the 30-mph speed limit?

The fact that the 2022/23 community speed watch figures show that 2.4% of cars recorded were speeding, demonstrates its incredible deterrence effect. CSW schemes are not designed to catch motorists unawares, hence why they are signposted, publicised beforehand, and volunteers wear high visibility clothing and stand in plain sight – they are designed to raise awareness of speeding, and to remind motorists how easy it can be to creep over the speed limit should attention wander.

The benefit of CSW is therefore not necessarily to catch motorists speeding, but to remind them of the dangers of speeding by providing a clear and visible deterrent and to assist with positive habit formation around watching our speed in potentially hazardous areas, something with which CSW excels.

Priority Three – Fight Violent Crime and High Harm

Why is the target for HMICFRS effectiveness assessment Adequate and not Good?

HMICFRS has recently removed the previous four-tier system of judgments that was used since 2014 – outstanding, good, requires improvement, and inadequate – acknowledging that the old system created strong incentives for forces graded as 'inadequate' or 'requires improvement' to improve but did not for those forces graded as 'good' or 'outstanding'. Additionally, it resulted in a very broad range of 'good' – from the very good to the barely good.

The new framework, in place since 2021/22, uses five tiers: outstanding, good, adequate, requires improvement and inadequate.

HMICFRS has stated that these changes mean that it is not possible to make direct comparisons between the grades awarded from 2021/22, and those from previous PEEL inspections – and have specifically stated that a perceived reduction in grade, particularly from good to adequate, does not necessarily mean that there has been a reduction in performance, unless the report commentary makes that point.

What this means therefore, is that like all forces, Dorset Police's inspections outcomes were effectively reset in 2021/22 – from the previous 'good' rating on the four-tier framework, to the current 'adequate' rating on the five-tier framework.

I encourage members to look at the current and historic assessments on the HMICFRS website and undertake their own scrutiny, but to summarise, in the first cycle for this new inspection regime 2021/22 – Dorset Police was assessed as having two goods, four adequates, and three requires improvements.

In my view, and in the view of the Chief Constable, given the financial constraints under which you have heard me describe many times, I believe that it is appropriate for Dorset Police to be targeting to improve those three areas where HMICFRS has noted that improvement is required, whilst maintaining performance in other areas – and therefore the right approach is to consolidate our assessments at the adequate or higher level, before we begin to undertake the additional work needed to target higher outcomes.

Chair, it is useful to put this into context. Members may be aware of how other forces in the SW have fared in these inspections - with two placed in what are often called 'special measures'. The conclusion being that, clearly, policing is collectively finding it harder to satisfy the current inspection regime. And that, comparatively, Dorset appears to be responding well to the operating environment we find ourselves in. So, make no mistake, we are ambitious, but I believe we must also recognise this context and set realistic milestones of delivery.

Priority Five - Put Victims and Communities First

What action has the PCC taken, in conjunction with the Ch Cons, in order to combat shoplifting?

Thank you for raising this issue, which, as you have correctly stated, is a matter that has been discussed extensively within the national media over the last few weeks and months. It is also an issue that has been closely associated with the Home Secretary's remarks about pursuing every offence where there is a reasonable line of enquiry – with that in mind, I will endeavour not to repeat the points I made as part of my previous answer. Instead, I will focus on the specific activity over the past three months.

As members will know, I convene a meeting – the Dorset Safer Business Partnership – to discuss issues like this with key partner agencies, including the police, and business representatives. The most recent of these meetings was held last week, with the focus being very much on retail crime, shoplifting and crime reporting.

At this meeting, Dorset Police reported that business crime reporting is up by 20% across the county. There has been an increase in shoplifting, including those instances in which offenders have become especially brazen – walking in, in plain sight, and scooping objects of shelves.

Police research reveals that 5% of offenders commit 50% of all business crime, so we know this is where our focus needs to be, and Dorset Police is already working through the small number of prolific offenders who are committing the majority of the shoplifting offences and also targeting the most prolific handlers of stolen goods.

- Dorset Police carry out Safer Business Action Days, this is a joint approach by police, business, private security, Business Crime Reduction Partnerships (BCRPs) and Business Improvement Districts (BIDs) working in partnership to focus resources into a designated location to create a significant impact to reduce crime.
- Dorset Police's 'Operation Enduring' is currently active in Bournemouth centre – this operation focuses on all the shoplifting / ASB and other crimes affecting businesses;
- Last week, Dorset Police also launched a targeted business crime operation called 'Operation Turnover' in Boscombe. The Force arrested a prolific shoplifting offender on the day of launch;
- Following community concerns raised in Swanage regarding an alleged prolific shoplifter the offender has been arrested and also has been given a Community Protection Notice – further investigations are ongoing;
- The Force is working closely with security and businesses in Boscombe and Southbourne to design out crime, and Police Officers, PCSOs, CSAS Officers, Town Rangers, security and others are also working together to tackle retail crime and keep retail workers safe.

Looking forward, there are also some developments that I am pleased to share:

- Dorset Police will be taking part in the NPCC Safer Business Action Week from 16 October, with police and partners across the country joining together to tackle shoplifting and other business crime in their communities.
- Bournemouth's Business Crime Reduction Partnership is about to launch – this involves the business community, BIDs and UKPAC working together to fight business crime.
- PCSO recruitment opened again on 1 September 2023. The adverts are live, and training will commence in the new year. New PCSOs should be in place and fully trained by March 2024 – we know that PCSOs play an important part in keeping our communities safe and help to improve our engagement with local communities, including businesses.

This is just a summary of recent activity, but I hope it demonstrates that we are very much alive to the rise in shoplifting and business crime more generally and that action is being taken – and will continue to be taken – to tackle this important issue.

FY 23/24 Q4 finance questions:

The pay and employment costs include a £1.2M saving in order to meet the Forecast of Outturn. With the shortfall of £2.1M across the Financial Year and this £1.2M, how will the PCC ensure that services are not affected for the people of Dorset in order to meet these savings.

Treasurer to reply in writing.

Borrowing for the Capital budget is scheduled to be in year £16.3M - how is the PCC ensuring that the overall debt for Dorset Police is serviceable?

The borrowing requirements for the capital programme are factored into the Medium Term Financial Forecast to ensure that the revenue costs of the borrowing are affordable, and that borrowing is the most appropriate source of funding - this is an ongoing process.

The borrowing needs are closely monitored by my Treasurer, taking into account the capital programme as well as cashflow and treasury management advice, in order to minimise the interest element of the borrowing costs.

As we knew that the requirements for this year were higher than usual, and the forecast was for increasing interest rates, the borrowing required for the current year was undertaken before the start of the financial year at rates ranging from 3.81% and 3.99%.

This is fully factored into the current year's budget and future years. No further borrowing requirements are currently forecast this year, and future years requirements will look to be managed on a short term basis until interest rates fall back closer to the 3% level.