

Crime and Disorder Committee

Tuesday, 15 September 2020

Attendees: Councillor Lewis Barber, Councillor Kevin Bentley, Councillor Paul Dundas, Councillor Chris Hayter, Councillor Mike Hogg, Councillor Sam McCarthy, Councillor Lorcan Whitehead
Apologies: Councillor Tina Bourne
Substitutes: Councillor Dave Harris (for Councillor Tina Bourne)

28 Minutes of Previous Meeting

RESOLVED that the minutes of the meeting held on 15 September 2019 be confirmed as a correct record, subject to correction of a typographical error which erroneously listed Councillor Bentley as being in attendance.

29 Safer Colchester Partnership

Councillor Hogg (by reason of being the trustee and license holder for a local charity) declared a non-pecuniary interest in the following item pursuant to the provisions of Meetings General Procedure Rule 7 (5). Councillor Bentley (by reason of being the Deputy Leader of Essex County Council) declared a non-pecuniary interest in the following item pursuant to the provisions of Meetings General Procedure Rule 7 (5).

Pamela Donnelly, Chair of the Safer Colchester Partnership and the Council's Strategic Director of Customer and Relationships, introduced the partners attending and thanked them for the work that their organisations carried out. The report was noted as highlighting some changes and details of the three current key priorities and the work of the statutory partners. The three priorities were:

- Tackling Organised Crime, Gangs and County lines with an emphasis on Drug Trafficking
- Driving down Anti-Social Behaviour and Violent Crime in public, focussing on Hate Crime
- Identifying and supporting the reporting of Hidden Harms with a proactive approach to those at risk of Domestic Abuse and Sexual Offences

The Strategic Director introduced Councillor Michael Lilley, Portfolio Holder for Communities, Wellbeing and Public Safety, detailed the recovery plan put in place by 'One Colchester' and the work to integrate the Safer Colchester Partnership into 'One Colchester.' The work done by local charities, Community 360 and foodbank were described, acting to help and support residents and the statutory partners. The Portfolio Holder highlighted the challenges presented by Covid 19, and the partnership working going on, including by the groups coordinated by Community 360. The lockdown and closures had produced a change in expected crimes, with initial expectations that antisocial behaviour (ASB) by young individuals would be prominent

then being superseded by evidence that antisocial behaviour was instead being committed by older residents and included parties, bonfires and other types of ASB. Drug dealing and issues from deprivation had continued and were being addressed by the Safer Colchester Partnership. Pubs and bars had reopened, but problems had been caused due to the lack of government guidance given. Over 400 venues were being visited by licensing officers, who offered advice and pressed for compliance.

Chief Inspector Rob Huddleston described the situation faced by the Police, and the work conducted to address it. The lockdown had initially led to a decrease in call numbers. Officers who had booked leave had cancelled this, leading to an increase in the officer levels available. Personal Protective Equipment was ensured so as to provide what was necessary for officers, and remote working used where possible. A patrol plan was put in place to protect closed businesses and monitor areas in which it was likely that people might congregate. Essex Police's response had been co-ordinated centrally by a Gold Commander and dedicated Covid Response Team.

Colchester Police were pursuing an 'Engage, explain, encourage and enforce' approach, in that order. Work to reassure the public and build trust was prioritised, and hidden harms (such as domestic abuse) was a priority alongside protection of lives and property. Work has continued, both with town centre partners and with partners and residents in rural areas. An example was the close working with licensees within the Pubwatch scheme.

Enforcement against antisocial behaviour included the issuing of closure orders, and a description of this process and the ways it could be used was given.

The Police were awaiting legislative guidance as to the most-recently introduced provisions [including Covid Marshals]. The first information had been received the previous night and more was expected over the following few days.

521 fewer crimes were recorded in 2020-21 (up to end of July, compared to same timespan in 2019-20). Reductions were seen in burglary, shoplifting, robbery, sexual offences and hate crime. 86 fewer incidents of antisocial behaviour were recorded. The uniform operational solve rate had improved by 3.4%.

Combating gangs and County Lines operations remained priorities for the Police, leading a multi-agency panel to disrupt both of these areas of criminal activity. A major gang involved in drugs and firearms provision had been broken up and 14 members on remand or convicted of offences, including supplying of Class A drugs. Proactive, intelligence-led operations continued. Operation Sceptre continued to target the carrying of offensive weapons.

Judicious use of stop and search powers continued, with 1,964 stop and searches being carried out since the Committee last met, with a 30.24% success rate, with weapons, drugs, or crime-related items discovered. To the end of July, 12.9% of stop and searches had been conducted on BAME individuals, roughly in line with the percentage demographics for race in the area. The Committee discussed this and asked whether the local Police service had a different approach compared to elsewhere, given the difference between this and the national statistics relating to race and stop and search. The Chief Inspector was asked for information on the likelihood of fixed penalty notices being issued, broken down by race.

Chief Inspector Huddleston explained that Colchester Police had been working on stop and search for years, to maximise deterrence but minimise the effect on communities, operating with respect and based on intelligence received, rather than in a blanket operation. Fixed penalty notices covered a huge range of transgressions, including driving offences, and no specific details were noted.

A reduction in 'violence with injury' offences had been recorded of 423 fewer incidents over that period than for the same period in 2019-20. An example given was the Riverside Estate, where reports of antisocial behaviour and drug dealing had been addressed with a visual police presence, stops and searches and work to improve the ability of residents to feel safe. Antisocial behaviour and violent crime had then dropped.

Lockdown had seen an increase in dangerous driving offences reported. Full training was given to more officers on use of the 'TrueCam' technology to help detect, enforce and prosecute malefactors. A dispersal order had been served at Abberton Reservoir to crack down on illegal car meets. Antisocial use of off-road motorbikes had been tackled, including related crime and drugs activities.

The Chief Inspector summarised a range of additional Police activities, such as working with parish clerks to distribute information to residents and businesses, identifying where closure orders were needed, 'Coffee with Cops' events in communities, engaging via local radio stations and working with Street Pastors and the SOS Bus. A Night of Action had been held with the Borough Council on 7 August, when a large range of premises were visited to ensure compliance with Covid-19 regulations.

An Independent Advisory Group fed into and steered policing actions to deal with hidden harms, and new organisations were now attending to advise on BLM views. A representative of the local Youth Council also attended, and the Group discussed approaches and strategy on a range of issues. There were now four youth engagement officers operating in Colchester, working on safeguarding and carrying out liaison duties to reassure residents and support schools. Operation Encompass acted to protect children from domestic abuse.

The Committee asked for details of recovery plans and planning for the future reflecting changes from the Covid-19 outbreak. The Strategic Director of Customer and Relationships gave a summary of the recovery work being carried out across the Safer Colchester Partnership and, more widely, the One Colchester Partnership. Key priorities had been ensuring that the most-vulnerable residents had their needs met, and to then move on to recovery planning. Objectives had been shown in the report and the inter-organisation between partners had helped to start recovery work. Part of this was to strengthen the communities which had been especially hard-hit and included work by foodbanks and the effective use of community assets. A local delivery pilot had been designed to increase activity, fitness and health within communities.

The Committee thanked and praised the work of the Safer Colchester partners during recent difficult times. It was queried whether recruitment drives and hiring were being carried out to maintain or increase numbers of officers and whether expected staffing

members would be met. Chief Inspector Huddleston confirmed that Police recruitment continued, albeit using online aptitude tests and interviews, with training spread out to ensure safety. Uniform staffing had been better than ever, and backfilling of the detective branch had been carried out. Only two officers had left in recent times, both taking retirement.

The Committee asked whether the drop of 521 in crime numbers, compared to last year, was due to Covid-19 or whether there had been month-on-month drops for each of the last 12 months compared to the previous year. The Chief Inspector committed to provide Committee members with the relevant data to answer this question. There had been a drop in burglaries during lockdown and an increase in patrols to prevent commercial break-ins. Concern had now shifted to online fraud and similar crime, especially Covid-19 fraud such as phishing for financial details. Information and reassurance were being given to residents. The Committee asked that the statistics and an update be provided to all Borough councillors.

The Committee praised the lines of communication to the Police for reporting problems, especially the email address available for councillors to use and cautioned that the Council should remember that crime and antisocial behaviour affected population centres throughout the Borough, including the settlements of Wivenhoe and Tiptree, where some crime had spread.

County Lines drugs issues were discussed, where metropolitan gangs moved into local exploitation and provision of illicit substances and items. 18 different lines had been identified and, up to present day, 11 of these had been disrupted and were inactive. Pockets of dealing remained, including in Greenstead and at the Hythe. Recently more rural areas were involved, including antisocial behaviour and the exploitation of vulnerable residents used to disguise the trade. Instances of harassment and threatening behaviour had been recorded.

Operation Sceptre was discussed, and the Panel was informed that it had had a significant effect on knife crime, and indirectly on drug crime. The disruption of drug gang operations also continued via the work of Raptor Teams, working with the Metropolitan Police to take out the ends and origins of county lines. There were currently only seven active drugs gangs in the area, two of which were home-grown. Police actions continued to target these gangs.

A Committee member asked for better ways to discuss and communicate any issues to report regarding half-way houses, such as antisocial behaviour. The Chief Inspector urged councillors to continue to report any issues to the Community Policing Team, which worked closely with Nacro and other local partners to identify and solve any problems. David Messam [Head of North Essex LDU – National Probation Service], explained that the Probation Service also had a good relationship with the Police and, if in receipt of information regarding individuals out on license and potentially in breach of this, would engage to resolve issues or, in worst cases, recall to custody. Jenny Gibson [Manager, Service Delivery, Essex Community Rehabilitation Company Ltd] elaborated on this to explain the good relationships and multi-agency working in operation. The Company's local lead officer led on resettlement and maintaining links with Nacro. Contact details were available for councillors to use and enforcement action would be taken where issues are identified regarding individuals.

The Committee requested more information on the increase in rates of reported hate crimes and on the impact of lockdown on domestic abuse/violence rates. The Committee were told that the Police had opened new ways to report hate crimes over the past year and, whilst there had not been significant changes in cases reported since the previous year, the biggest problem area in Colchester was racial hatred. The Police worked with communities to tackle this and, with Community 360, had instituted a BAME conference to help officers better understand the problems being faced. This had started with around ten attendees, increasing now to around 50. There had initially been a drop in reports of domestic abuse during lockdown, thought to be because victims often wanted to avoid causing a scene in front of children. Resources had been put in place to deal with an expected increase in reports following the end of lockdown. There was concern at the increase in violence reported, with 13 more domestic violence warnings being issued than the next-best performing authority in the region. Best practice was described, and ways to safely report any domestic violence allegations involving a police officer were in place.

Expected trends for the future were discussed, with organised crime gangs diversifying from drugs to people trafficking, modern slavery and other sources of income. Crime prevention information was being circulated and advertised.

The Committee praised the reporting function available for councillors to report crime, and the information updates produced by the Police. Members queried how the Police and local authorities worked together to enforce restrictions related to Covid-19 and dealing with breaches. The new provisions for appointing 'Covid Marshals' were queried regarding how these would fit in with future enforcement work. It was explained that the Police worked closely with the Council's licensing officers, including joint visits to venues. The Covid patrol plan included visiting a minimum of three venues per night to check adherence to regulations. The rural strategy fed into the Covid patrol plans and efforts continued to build local connections and deal with traditional crimes. No guidance had yet been received regarding Covid Marshal powers and who would employ them, but this was expected in coming days.

Mel Rundle, Communities Group Manager, gave an overview of the Council's licensing team's activities. Good partnership working was in place and the team operated a direct approach to tackle reported problems and breaches of regulations. Community Protection Warnings could be issued and the team worked with the Essex Director of Health to issue orders regarding the operation of different premises/venues. The team's approach to visiting and taking action, where needed, was outlined.

There was funding available from government for any local authority on the watch list (e.g. where the R rate has exceeded a certain level) and this included funding for Covid Marshals. Colchester was not on the watch list, so funding was not expected for Marshals. The Colchester Ambassadors currently covered certain of the Marshal duties in town and provided information, advice and reminders of current regulations. The Portfolio Holder for Communities, Wellbeing and Public Safety confirmed that the Council would present its approach to councillors and the public once the guidance had been received and digested. The Portfolio Holder informed the Committee that it will be a Council priority to ensure compliance with the national 'track and trace' effort.

At present, the Council did not have funds to employ Covid Marshals.

The Portfolio Holder for Communities, Wellbeing and Public Safety noted that many breaches could be seen and that evidence of these can be sent to the Police to make enforcement possible. Community Police Officers were working well with the ASB officers of Colchester Borough Homes. The Portfolio Holder requested that councillors reporting nuisances provide a community impact statement. This could feed into enforcement and prosecutions. A Committee member questioned the use of such statements, asking whether these would be considered hearsay evidence and therefore whether they were admissible as evidence in legal proceedings. It was also questioned whether anonymous reports could be made by residents to councillors. It was explained that the statements were to show the perceived negative impact of an action or crime, rather than to provide direct evidence to prove culpability of an accused individual. Chief Inspector Huddleston elaborated on this to explain that community impact statements were used to support applications for enforcement action. Generally they could show impacts without identifying complainants, and were generally considered in secure closed hearings.

Various issues were raised and queried by the Committee, such as speeding and road meets at Abberton Reservoir, with Police working with parish councils to carry out effective enforcement actions. Thanks had been received from several parish councils.

The Committee were briefed on county lines issues relating to cuckooing [the taking over of a property for illegal activities, usually victimising vulnerable residents] and actions to address them. The Police had detected such activities going on, although there had not been significant numbers of cases. Cases were responded to with a partnership response involving safeguarding of vulnerable residents, provision of alternative accommodation, and closure orders (some full, some partial). Partial closure orders allowed a resident to stay in a property but provided a deterrent to stop gang activities, with gangs wanting to avoid using properties being watched by the Police. This helped reduce antisocial behaviour, fear and harassment.

The Committee discussed the Police's powers regarding lockdowns and enforcement of Covid regulations. Enforcement was the last resort, if efforts to 'Engage, explain and encourage' failed. Current legislation allowed the issuing of fixed penalty notices of £100. 20,000 engagements had been recorded over the past year, but very few fixed penalties had been issued as most residents had valid reasons for their behaviour or apologised for transgressions.

The Chief Inspector informed the Committee that the latest guidance regarding the 'Rule of 6' had just been received. There were extra patrols for licensed premises and 65 priority locations had been identified for monitoring and patrol due to the likelihood of regulation breaches.

David Messam [Head of North Essex LDU – National Probation Service], answered questions about remote working by partners, agreeing that there had been a reduction in face-to-face work, as this was replaced, where possible, by telephone contacts and doorstep visits. Office visits continued for high-risk offenders. Remote options were now gradually being replaced by in-person meetings, but the remote options that

worked well would continue where appropriate.

Jenny Gibson, Manager, Service Delivery, Essex Community Rehabilitation Company Ltd, explained that the Company's recovery operations had largely been in line with those of the national probation service and that they had also used remote meeting options and doorstep appointments. Covid-secure working had been introduced, with full risk assessments and team bubbles being set up. 'Project in a Box' work continued, with service users carrying out homework to help the community, e.g. making facemasks.

Karen Loweman, Director of Operations at Colchester Borough Homes, gave an overview of the Company's operations during lockdown. Most staff had moved to homeworking, however CBH kept a presence within the community, especially where vulnerable residents were concerned. Work continued with the Police to combat antisocial behaviour and the Community Caretakers and other officers maintained vigilance to detect any hidden harms.

Pam Green, North-East Essex CCG Chief Operating Officer, gave a high-level view of the huge shift in health service delivery which had been needed during 2020. Statutory partners had become strong health allies and partners in health and safety, especially within the 'Once Colchester' partnership. An improvement in results had been noted, with tackling long-term conditions and providing vaccinations. The work of the North-East Essex Health and Wellbeing Alliance was described.

Lee Bailey, County Council Lead for Partnership Delivery, Children & Families, gave assurance that visits to vulnerable children continued, albeit using social distance and protective equipment. For less-acute cases, officers used gardens, parks and dog walks or online meetings. A spike in referrals had been expected but had not come to pass.

The Chair of the meeting thanked the Safer Colchester Partnership for presenting, and thanked members of the Committee for their questions and scrutiny.

RESOLVED that the Committee had scrutinised the work of the Safer Colchester Partnership (SCP).