

2nd July 2021

Dear Home Secretary

Re. HMICFRS report: The police response to the coronavirus pandemic during 2020

The outbreak of Covid-19 has brought challenges to our society which few will have experienced before. During the most stringent phases of the national lockdown, most of us will have been following government advice to stay at home, with an inevitable impact on our working lives, the schooling of children, and the care of elderly members of our families. Amidst this, key workers in the emergency services and NHS have needed to carry out their vital work in the unprecedented context of a global pandemic which - at its peak - claimed the lives of hundreds of people each day.

West Yorkshire Police's officers worked throughout the most challenging phases of the pandemic, carrying out their duties with and for the public during a time of great uncertainty. Let me put on record my great thanks to the officers and staff of our local police service for their vital work during such a critical time.

The work of the Office of the Police and Crime Commissioner in West Yorkshire also needed to adapt quickly to new these circumstances. Covid placed intense pressure on criminal justice services, and also on local services which provide support to the victims of crime. Throughout the pandemic, it was vital that services for victims, survivors, and vulnerable people were maintained, and so I issued a pledge to our OPCC funded service providers that we would maintain our usual grant payments and support them where services needed to adapt to meet changing needs.

Furthermore, the West Yorkshire OPCC ran an extraordinary grant round of our Safer Communities Fund, distributing £174k to vital grassroots organisations at the peak of the crisis.

As HMICFRS's report describes, West Yorkshire Police (WYP) were one of the forces whose plans in 2019 to run a training exercise based on the outbreak of a pandemic disease were disrupted by Brexit planning. However, looking back we can be reassured by the comprehensive nature of WYP's response to Covid, and its commitment to maintain the quality of its service and support throughout 2020/21.

Some of the actions WYP has undertaken in response to the report's recommendations are highlighted below:

Co-ordination by Covid Gold

WYP's response to the pandemic and the resulting challenges to working practice were co-ordinated by the force's Covid Gold team. Throughout the pandemic, national legislative changes have been reviewed with the force's legal, command and tactical advisors, and this information was cascaded down to West Yorkshire district Covid Hubs, who have regularly received updated training advice from the Gold team.

A designated website on the Force intranet was created to house all relevant information.

District operations

Whilst crime types and volumes fluctuated throughout the pandemic, WYP maintained a position of 'business as usual' in terms of investigations and warrants for arrest. Through thorough planning, the early adoption of PPE, and the application of new technologies, WYP was able to continue to deliver its services effectively. Where Covid-related demand placed additional strain on resources, the Covid Gold team allocated funding for increased resources to mitigate these challenges.

Test and Trace

All district Covid hubs were aware of the requirements around test, track, and trace, and implemented a consistent approach in line with government guidance. The force Covid Silver team has had regular contact with Public Health England colleagues to understand best practice and address any issues arising.

Safeguarding the Vulnerable

All WYP contact staff were provided with guidance and training relating to safeguarding under Covid, and were updated on the different approaches required for risk assessment in cases of mental health, domestic, or child abuse during the instances of national lockdowns. The force's Safeguarding Central Governance Unit will be conducting a full review, with the aim of creating a 'lessons learned' resource should these circumstances present again.

Crime

The report recommends that forces must make sure that officers understand and correctly implement College of Policing guidance for managing registered sex offenders during the pandemic. I can confirm that West Yorkshire Police have implemented this guidance and are compliant with the College's Authorised Professional Practice.

Criminal Justice

The Covid lockdowns presented severe challenges for the running of normal criminal justice practices, and contributed to the creation of an unprecedented backlog within the CJS.

- A full review of the witness care unit is currently being undertaken looking at current and future process, reflecting on the use of new technology during the pandemic.
- WYP closely monitored the use of bail and RUI (released under investigation) during the pandemic, and reported that trends in the use of both remained comparable with pre-pandemic figures. Detainees were advised of temporary changes in how they could obtain legal advice.
- The force ensured that detainees were released safely following a thorough risk assessment. Where appropriate detainees have been equipped with PPE on release.

The report recommends forces review the impact of newly implemented processes such as telephone witness statements, and how this may impact on public satisfaction with the

police's service, and as a result, WYP Corporate Services established a review process during 2020 to monitor and evaluate new working practices.

This work focussed on the use of Body Worn Video for interviews, and the trial use of video conferencing for Voluntary Attendance interviews. West Yorkshire Police continue to monitor the use of remote solicitor consultations, as well as warrant applications, whilst the appropriate use of telephone witness statements is now an established practice in force.

It has been a year like no other, and we are acutely aware of the great pressures our communities have had to bear. The role of the police continues to be critical in managing the social repercussions of the virus, and we know just how much people value the unwavering commitment of the police officers and staff who have stepped up to meet these challenges on our behalf.

As we can start to make plans for a post-Covid life, the police and associated criminal justice services will take time to reflect on the implementation and effectiveness of the new working practices which were rapidly adopted in the wake of the Covid emergency. We will continue to review this work through our usual partnership, accountability, and bilateral meetings.

Yours,

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

Alison Lowe

Deputy Mayor of West Yorkshire for Policing and Crime