

WEST MERCIA POLICE AND CRIME PANEL 10 SEPTEMBER 2019

RURAL CRIME

Recommendation

1. Members of the Panel are invited to consider this report.

Purpose

2. The purpose of this report is to provide the members of the Panel with a summary of the PCC's work in relation to rural crime including the development of his rural crime strategy and the outcome of the recent Facebook Live holding to account meeting on rural crime. The report also includes an overview of rural crime data and examples of how rural crime issues are being addressed.

Introduction

3. The PCC set out his strategic commitment to addressing rural crime in the Safer West Mercia Plan. Contained within the objective, *Reassuring West Mercia's Communities* the PCC states that he will hold the Chief Constable to account for:

Making sure voices and priorities are heard and acted on from within our rural communities, via the Rural Matters plan to ensure their specific needs are addressed.

4. In support of this commitment in 2017 the PCC confirmed funding to the force for the provision of five Rural and Business Officer (RABO) posts, one for each of the local policing areas. Prior to this there had been a mixed provision of RABO posts across the force area. The RABOs role is to raise confidence within rural and business communities through proactive engagement and problem solving initiatives and to provide a visible presence in these communities.
5. More recently the PCC has committed to using some of the monies raised through the 2019/20 precept increase for resources dedicated to tackling rural crime, including the appointment of an additional five dedicated officers. As part of this uplift the five existing RABO posts have also been extended until 31 March 2021.
6. Dedicated rural and business crime vehicles have been purchased with PCC funding. The five new vehicles, with the distinctive 'Rural Matters' and 'We Don't Buy Crime' branding, will be based across the force area and will be used by officers to support rural communities and work to reduce crime.
7. The PCC has also provided funding to enable an additional seventeen officers to undergo wildlife crime training. (Wildlife crime refers to crimes against wild animals

and plants). These individuals are regular officers that have completed specialist training that allows them to provide guidance and support around investigating wildlife offences. The number of wildlife officers, based around West Mercia, has now been brought up to 30.

8. More widely the uplift in police officer numbers which will see an additional 215 officers across West Mercia's communities has already seen an increase in officer numbers in some of the most rural parts of the force area and PCC funded initiatives such as 'We Don't Buy Crime' are providing rural communities with a real opportunity to increase their resilience to crime.

Rural crime strategy

9. The PCC has agreed an approach to the development of a number of key strategy documents in support of his Safer West Mercia Plan objectives, including rural crime.
10. The rural crime strategy has been informed by policy research, an analysis of available crime data, national surveys and through feedback to the PCC and his Deputy from rural communities through a range of engagement channels including meetings, events, social media and correspondence.
11. The background research has identified that there is no national government strategy or approach to rural crime nor an agreed definition of a rural crime. As a consequence national strategies and reports from stakeholders including the National Police Chiefs' Council and NFU Mutual, along with findings from the National Rural Crime Network's rural crime survey and police crime data have been reviewed to provide the policy context.
12. The resulting draft strategy developed around the PIER principles of *prevention, intervention, enforcement and reassurance* clearly articulates the PCC's aspirations and his expectations of the force, stakeholders and of his own commitments to addressing rural crime. Following public consultation the strategy will be finalised and published and an action plan developed to support its implementation.
13. The draft strategy will be released for consultation in September. A copy of the draft strategy will be sent to the Panel as part of the consultation process and the responses from the consultation will be shared with the Panel at its next available meeting.

Facebook Live holding to account

14. The PCC has established a yearly holding to account programme as part of his statutory duty to hold the Chief Constable to account and in doing so to provide reassurance to the community on policing in West Mercia. In 2018 the PCC introduced public facing meetings. These give the public an opportunity to submit questions on a chosen theme, and to watch a livestream of the resulting holding to account meeting. The public can also submit questions while the meeting is being live streamed. The most recent Facebook Live meeting was in June 2019 and was focused on rural crime

Promotion and Engagement:

15. An initial evaluation of the promotion and engagement surrounding June's meeting has taken place. Findings from the evaluation show:
16. **Number of questions:** 39 questions were submitted in advance (more than double that of the last event where 18 advance questions were received). The majority were received face to face at public events including at the Shropshire County Show and Hereford Food Festival. The event was also promoted at the Oswestry Rural Parish Council Rural Meeting and at a Bromsgrove Residents Meeting.
17. In addition 30 comments were made during the live stream, constituting 16 questions, bringing the total number of questions to 55.
18. **Social media engagement-in advance** – a number of Facebook posts were made in advance of the meeting reaching over 11,000 people. Six posts were shared on Twitter.
19. **Other promotion** – two press releases were issued and a printed leaflet was produced for use at meetings and for distribution by, amongst others, RABOs, Wildlife Crime Officers, Community Ambassadors, Cadets and SNTs. Details were also sent to all Community, Rural and Horse Watch groups in the West Mercia areas via the Community Messaging Service. The event was also promoted in the PCC's own newsletter.
20. **Social Media Engagement** - The event went live at 7pm on Monday 24th June 2019 and ran for approximately 52 minutes. It reached 7,204 people, a 147% increase on the previous event and has been viewed 3101 times, a 73% increase on the previous event. The majority of viewers were in the first three minutes of the broadcast, and the average video watch time was just 28 seconds.
21. The meeting remains available to view on the PCC's website.

Issues raised

22. It was made clear to anyone submitting a question that there was no guarantee their individual question would be raised during the meeting. All people submitting questions were informed that if their issue was not covered during the meeting that they would receive a response after the event.
23. Of the 39 questions received in advance a number raised similar concerns or covered the same theme. Where this occurred the questions were grouped together to form one question for the PCC to address. This approach avoided duplication, enabled as many different topic areas to be covered in the meeting as possible, and allowed for a meaningful discussion on each question area.
24. During the live streaming itself the audience could submit questions via a Twitter feed, which were then passed onto the PCC during the meeting. A number of these were also used during the meeting.
25. The following rural crime related issues / themes were addressed during the Facebook Live meeting:

- How the investment in additional officers would be used to improve services in rural areas;
- Cross border criminality
- Wildlife crime
- Fly tipping
- County lines drugs in rural towns
- Engaging and diverting young people away from anti-social behaviour in rural areas
- Promotion of good news stories
- Theft of livestock
- Engagement with academia
- Burglary
- Road safety

26. The issues addressed in the meeting did not give rise to any specific actions for the force to address other than a commitment to work more closely with academia, however the issues were used to inform the PCC rural crime strategy.

27. In addition to a recording of the Facebook Live event being available to view on the PCC's website, meeting notes were also taken and are published on the website. A copy of these notes is attached at appendix 1.

Crime data and rural areas

27. As mentioned in paragraph 11 there is no agreed national definition of rural crime. West Mercia Police is one of a number of forces that has defined rural crime as being: any crime or anti-social behaviour that takes place in a rural location or is identified as such by the victim. (The Office for National Statistics (ONS) 2011 Rural-Urban Classification is used by the force to distinguish rural and urban areas).

28. During 2018/19, 23% of total recorded crime in West Mercia occurred in rural areas, a slight increase from 2017/18 when it accounted for 22%. This proportion has remained very stable for a number of years, for example in 2012/13 the proportion was also 23%. In general crime in rural areas mirrors crime trends across the whole force area

29. Data in the latest police performance report submitted to the Panel states that 1,539 rural offences were recorded in June 2019, a decrease compared to May (1,601) and below the monthly average (1,584). Rural crime levels are within expected levels.

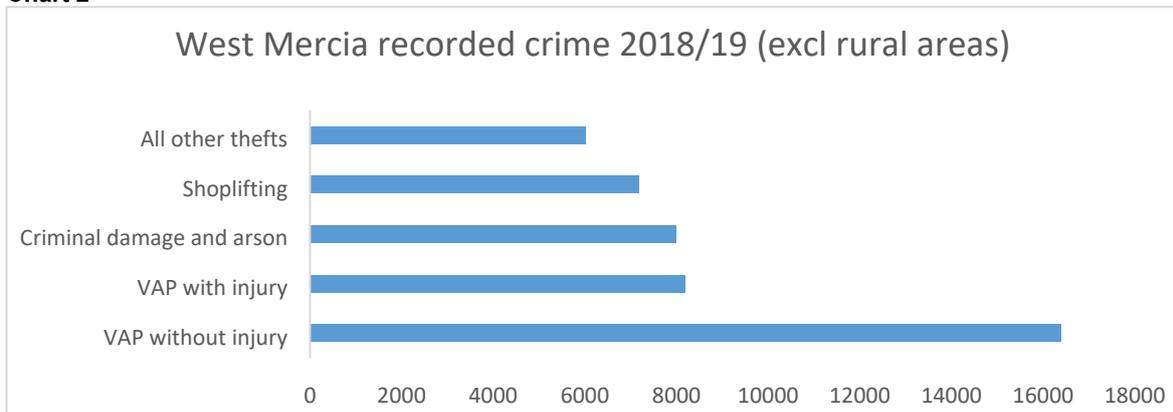
29. Looking more closely at the types of crime occurring in rural areas shows that in 2018/19 the most prevalent crime was violence against the person without injury, the same as in 2017/18. Chart 1 below shows the highest volume police recorded rural crimes in West Mercia during 2018/19.

Chart 1



30. When comparing police recorded rural crime to the remainder of West Mercia, the types of crime occurring are very similar. Chart 2 shows the breakdown of recorded crime in West Mercia as a whole for 2018/19 excluding the rural areas. Shoplifting is more prevalent in these areas and a high volume crime, whereas over the same time period there were only 635 shoplifting offences recorded in rural West Mercia. A similar pattern of crime occurred in 2017/18.

Chart 2



31. Data in the latest police performance report shows that violence against the person (VAP) without injury remains the highest volume crime in both rural and urban areas, with an increasing trend in both. In rural areas VAP without injury represents 26% of all rural crime, whereas in non rural areas it represents 20% of all crime. It is important to note that crime types are not necessarily *pure* rural crimes; VAP with and without injury offences are experienced everywhere, and they are not therefore solely a rural crime. Any supporting intelligence products such as a domestic abuse threat assessment wouldn't therefore define the threat in terms of rural or non rural areas.

32. Accepting that rural crime can be applied to mean any type of crime that occurs in a rural area, there are certain crimes which could be regarded as being more specific to rural areas such as crimes involving farm equipment, livestock and wildlife crime. The policy research for the PCC's rural crime strategy has identified that intelligence around rural crime is limited at both a national level and at force level and the PCC's rural crime strategy is seeking to address this by making better use of data and intelligence to understand issues relevant to rural communities.

33. When there is an increasing trend or pattern in a particular crime type outside of expected levels in any geographic area then analysis of intelligence is undertaken to identify the causes and address the issue. Outlined below are three case studies

which provide an indication of how resources are used to address some of the crimes impacting in rural areas.

34. **Theft of sheep, and sheep slaughter** (Shropshire / Telford borders). The incident was initially handled by the SNT, with other officers being brought in. The Designing out Crime officer became involved, and the We Don't Buy Crime Team did a lot of work with the farmer involved. This included undercover activity work on the farm. The RABO met with the NFU, at a regional meeting and discussed the issues, and emphasised the levels of activity taking place and the importance of sharing intelligence with the police. As a lot of the police activity was covert the RABO also met with local parish councils to provide reassurance that the issue was being addressed, particularly as the sheep slaughter attracted a lot of local media attention.
35. **Op Vulture to disrupt / target cross travelling criminality with a focus on rural crime** (South Shropshire). Op Vulture was conducted over two evenings/nights on the 19th and 20th of June. Resources were provided by local SNTs, OPU and the Dog Section. Over the two nights a total 105 checks were conducted by SNT staff with another 50 by OPU officers. This resulted in a number of arrests. Five arrests were for driving under the influence of drugs. One of the detainees was also found in possession of an offensive weapon. The most notable incident was when a vehicle failed to stop for police. This resulted in five arrests and a firearm was recovered by officers. A number of traffic related offences were also dealt with.
36. **Theft from outbuildings of a manor house** (Herefordshire). On the same day the theft was reported a Police & Community Support Officer (PCSO) attended and established that lead from the roof has also been stolen and reports that it would appear the offenders were disturbed around 5am by another resident who had discovered their trailer had been unhitched from their car and wheeled a cross a lawn. The trailer had been left outside the shed with a ride on mower inside and the tail gate lowered in readiness to steal it. The PCSO discovered an implement used by the offenders had been left at the scene together with an empty cider can. Those items were seized for forensic examination and the victim provided with a SmartWater kit.
37. The PCSO advised the occupants that they would benefit from some Crime Reduction advice and left. The RABO has since attended and given a presentation to the victim and surrounding neighbours on some crime reduction opportunities. As a direct result of that, several neighbouring properties have requested and received bespoke crime reduction advice for their own properties delivered by the RABO. This community would also like to be a We Don't Buy Crime Smartwater Village, and are going through the process to become one.
38. As a result of the work by the SNT and RABO one victim of crime has stated they received a good standard of service and is now reassured and more confident in the Police. There are also many more people who have, as a direct result of that one incident, been provided with appropriate, realistic and cost effective crime prevention advice who are now themselves more reassured and confident than before.

Supporting Information

Appendix 1 – Monthly Assurance Meeting June 2019 – Meeting Notes

Contact Points

Specific Contact Points for this report

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Background Papers

In the opinion of the proper officer (in this case the Head of Legal and Democratic Services) there are no background papers relating to the subject matter of this report.