

OVERVIEW AND SCRUTINY PERFORMANCE BOARD 22 JULY 2020

INTERIM COVID-19 WORCESTERSHIRE COUNTY COUNCIL COMMUNITY SAFETY UPDATE REPORT

Summary

1. This Report sets out some of the ways in which the COVID-19 pandemic has been impacting upon the community safety work supported by Worcestershire County Council (the Council) and its key partners and to update the Board on how this has been managed to date.
2. The Cabinet Member with Responsibility (CMR) for Health and Wellbeing, the Director of Public Health and the Senior Public Health Practitioner have been invited to the Meeting.

Background

3. The Board has been designated by the Council as its statutory Crime and Disorder Scrutiny Committee and is responsible for the consideration of Crime and Disorder matters. As part of this responsibility, the Board usually meets on an annual basis with Crime and Disorder partners, to discuss issues of mutual interest.
4. Due to COVID-19, this has been deferred until later in the year and the Board is being provided with interim report, briefly setting out some of the current issues and summarising how key areas of work are being managed across the partnerships and how some activities have been adapting to help keep people safe.

Issues for the Panel to Consider

5. All parts of the Council have been adapting to manage the consequences of COVID-19 and this has significantly impacted on Public Health, where staff have been redeployed to lead and manage the emergency response. Staff who ordinarily work on community safety have and still are required to support the emergency planning response, managing advice and support, including to care homes and schools and providing daily data and analysis on COVID-19 to a range of leadership groups. Whilst some work is returning to "business as usual", there is still a requirement to support the wider COVID-19 work and some areas of community work have been delayed or are in abeyance, although as set out below, the system supporting community safety has adapted well to these very challenging circumstances.
 6. During the early response and at the height of the pandemic, usual working arrangements were impacted, with the instant move to remote working by the majority of staff and the suspension of much of the partnership governance arrangements, although front line operational services such as the Worcestershire Children's First (WCF) Family Front Door and adult social care remained active.
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7. More recently, there has been a move back to running shorter virtual partnership meetings, primarily focusing on the impact and response to COVID-19 across the partnership. This has included two meetings of both the Domestic Abuse Forum (14 May and 1 July 2020), the Prevent Strategy Group (5 June and 9 July 2020) and the Safer Communities Board (SCB) (28 May and 7 July 2020), with single meetings to date of the Serious Organised Crime Joint Action Group (4 July 2020), the West Mercia Crime Reduction Board (24 June 2020) and the West Mercia Police and Crime Panel (15 June 2020). The two Community Safety Partnerships have also been very active in their District areas.

8. Strategic Action Plans for the SCB and its key subgroups have been streamlined and made more accessible taking a “plan on a page” approach.

9. Although the annual community safety report will provide more detail to the Board later in the year, there are some areas that warrant further information to be provided now. Domestic Abuse is one of those issues that has received much publicity and comment in terms of the impact of the COVID-19 lockdown on victims and their families and this is the topic which is primarily highlighted here.

Domestic Abuse

10. The Domestic Abuse Forum, which is chaired by Public Health, was prioritised and has met twice and will do so again during the summer before resuming its normal meetings cycle. It has received briefings from all key agencies on their recent experiences. The broad trend highlighted has been that reported incidents of domestic abuse and collated crime data was lower than usual in March and April, but the Police, Women’s Aid, WCF and the DAWN project all report that this has begun to change recently, and cases and referrals to services have begun to rise. This reduction was anticipated and coincided with the closure of schools and the full lockdown requirements being imposed in March. This appears slightly different to some of the national reporting on the increased numbers of domestic abuse cases, but the local position is being monitored closely by all agencies as suppression of reporting was likely.

11. In the South Worcestershire area, police records indicate in the year to date (as at 22 July 2020), there have been 1516 recorded domestic incidents which is a 12.5% increase on the same period last year, where 1347 incidents were recorded. In the same period in North Worcestershire there have been 1547 recorded domestic incidents which is a 6.6% increase from the same period last year where 1451 incidents were recorded.

12. The Police report good capacity to respond quickly to cases and Women’s Aid have been able to manage to support victims through remote services and have seen improved approaches through the use of technology and social media, which they will blend with face to face services when they finally resume.

13. There has been the sharing and publicising on social media and webpages in Worcestershire throughout lockdown, messaging that domestic abuse can and should be reported and was one of the few exemptions allowing people to leave their accommodation with children if affected, by domestic abuse. Also new tools and techniques have been provided and highlighted to allow victims to hide their

calls or web searches to domestic abuse support sites from perpetrators, to increase their safety and confidence in reporting. The use of IT has proved successful in continuing to provide services and link to victims and survivors and group sessions and the Freedom programme for domestic abuse survivors are now being run remotely. This approach is a great advantage for people with childcare responsibilities or who live in more remote areas.

14. The Refuges and safe accommodation having at one point not been full are now back at full capacity but are managing and Women's Aid are currently exploring how to expand their access to additional emergency accommodation with local Housing Associations in particular. District Councils currently report that there is no significant increase in reporting of homelessness due to domestic abuse, but again will be closely monitoring post lockdown and as economic challenges are faced in local communities.

15. The Domestic Abuse Bill that is currently going through the House of Commons will place new duties on the Council to assess the need for emergency and safe accommodation for victims of domestic abuse and for the Authority to commission such arrangements. It will also require a local Partnership Board to formulate strategic plans and report back to the Home Office on this work. It is expected that the Bill will be enacted this year.

16. Probation services have maintained distanced contact with offenders through the use of IT and have gained some useful insights through the use of video conferencing.

17. The Police and Crime Commissioner (PCC) is about to publish a comprehensive Domestic Abuse Needs Assessment and new Strategy which, will focus on how services can best be jointly commissioned and to focus in on extending the work with perpetrators that has been operating through the DRIVE Programme, which is jointly commissioned with Public Health. This will assist to underpin the well-established partnership work on domestic abuse in Worcestershire.

18. There has also been recent additional grant funding of £75,000 secured by Public Health via the Home Office, to assist victims and their families manage better in temporary accommodation. The PCC has received £434,000 funding through the Ministry of Justice to support domestic abuse and sexual violence services to manage additional pressures arising from COVID-19, with a significant proportion of the funding being utilised in Worcestershire.

19. Agencies have evolved and adapted domestic abuse services, particularly using IT to improve access and information and it is likely that many of these changes will be evaluated and adopted on a more permanent basis.

20. Sadly, there is a new Domestic Homicide Review case, which will consider the death of a female in Bromsgrove. Two other Domestic Homicide Reviews that had begun have by agreement been in abeyance during the height of the pandemic but are now being recommenced.

21. Other areas of work have continued across the Council, WCF and the wider partnership and set out below are other examples of the issues highlighted during

the COVID-19 period. The Safer Communities Board, which oversees the Domestic Abuse Forum and the Prevent Strategy Group has also met and received brief agency updates. A similar pattern emerges of agencies managing effectively and using new IT methods under very difficult circumstances, with most crime levels dipping during lockdown but now starting to increase again. Anti-social behaviour being one area that has been challenging in some places, but with a local response through the police local neighbourhood teams and Community Safety Partnerships.

Prevent

22. The Prevent Partnership group has received the Annual Counter Terrorism Local profile for Worcestershire. From this, a new annual action plan has been developed with the main focus this year being to ensure there is a good understanding at District level of community cohesion and where there are issues that require intervention or support, with some concerns about a growing threat from the far right. Also, to review awareness raising and the new prevent training modules that are being developed by the Home Office. There have been no referrals to the Channel Panel recently, which in part will be explained by schools and colleges not being fully operational to make referrals.

Serious Organised Crime

23. A virtual meeting of the Serious Organised Crime Joint Action Group took place on 4 July 2020. The broad consensus was that criminal activity at that time had reduced and the opportunity had been taken to proactively deal with areas of concern. For instance, West Mercia Police had visited farms and agricultural sector businesses to ascertain the effects of COVID. Farm labour is seeing a shortage of available workers and there were concerns over an influx of migrant workers from Eastern Europe to fill these vacancies. However, this appears not to have been the case. Concerns were raised that those workers who had decided not to return home and remain in the UK could potentially be at risk of exploitation through being displaced into other areas of low-skilled high demand work, unfamiliar to them. There is no evidence to suggest that this is the case either locally, regionally or nationally.

Child Exploitation

24. Get Safe Strategic and Operational meetings have been taking place and work against the action plan has progressed. An updated Get Safe Strategy was agreed at the last board meeting in June. The CLIMB, Diversionary Project (led by The Children's Society), commissioned by the PCC, was delayed in launching, but they have been receiving (phone) referrals since June. Over 20 briefings, across West Mercia, to front line practitioners have now been delivered to raise awareness of the Service. Early indications are positive that front line staff across the multi-agency sector are understanding the concept of the Project. This is evidenced through the submission of over 40 referral forms that have been accepted onto the cohort and case workers are now engaging those vulnerable to exploitation. The new Get Safe exploitation tool was launched on schedule in June and the "one Year on" launch took place. Children missing officers were initially dealing with cases remotely but have been back into face-to-face contact from the beginning of June, on a prioritised basis.

Trading Standards

25. Worcestershire Regulatory Services have been focusing on alerting the public to scams via social media and the Council's Communications Team are supporting Personal Protective Equipment (PPE) manufacturers and importers with advice in terms of meeting relevant standards. Also working with the Police to offer advice to licenced premises post lockdown to reduce the risks of possible infection spread and anti-social behaviour. The Police report little incidence of problems within public houses on the first weekend of reopening.

Conclusion

26. The Council continues to meet its own duties relating to community safety as far as it reasonably can during the COVID-19 pandemic. Notwithstanding interim changes in some staffing responsibilities and the move to home and distanced working, officers across the Authority and in commissioned services, have endeavoured to maintain front line, strategic and support services to assist and support those who are most at risk and vulnerable.

27. There will be considerable adaption still ahead, including to working practises and it is unclear what the full direct and indirect impacts of COVID-19 will be in the longer term. Some early understanding and learning is being applied and this may result in different ways of service delivery going forward.

Purpose of the Meeting

28. The Board is asked to:

- consider and comment on the interim report and consider any specific aspects it may wish to focus upon for the full annual community safety report and
- determine whether any further information or scrutiny on a particular topic is required.

Contact Point

Tim Rice. Senior Public Health Practitioner (Public Health Directorate) (01905) 843107
Email: TRice@worcestershire.gov.uk

Background Papers

In the opinion of the proper officer (in this case the Director of Public Health) there are no background papers relating to the subject matter of this report:

[All agendas and minutes are available on the Council's website here.](#)
