

# WEST MERCIA POLICE AND CRIME PANEL 27 NOVEMBER 2020

## THE IMPACT OF COVID 19 ON POLICING IN WEST MERCIA

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### Recommendation

Members of the Panel are asked to note this report.

### Introduction

1. The purpose of this report is to provide members of the Panel with an overview of the impact COVID-19 has had on policing in West Mercia. The report sets out how West Mercia Police has responded to the pandemic and used its resources to address the demands it has faced including strategic planning and partnership working; the impact of COVID-19 on the nature and scale of crime and incidents and; the Police and Crime Commissioners (PCC's) governance and oversight of the force response.

### Policing Response

#### Command structure

2. The police service has a number of core operational duties which include protecting life and property, preserving order, preventing the commission of offence and bringing offenders to justice. Additionally, as a Category 1 Responder under the Civil Contingencies Act 2004 the police service has a core role in the planning and response to civil emergencies. To fulfil its duties in light of the pandemic, West Mercia Police implemented a recognised approach to its command structure, with defined gold, silver and bronze levels of command and responsibilities put in place.

3. The gold commander is the Deputy Chief Constable. At the beginning of March 2020, he established a gold group (Op Heracles) to prepare for the impact of the pandemic. This group maintains strategic oversight and direction of the whole organisational approach. A gold strategy was developed in line with government and National Police Chiefs' Council (NPCC) guidance. The gold strategy sets out how the force will preserve life and protect the public by working in partnership with Public Health and other agencies to provide a coordinated response.

4. Below gold, the silver lead is a commander, whose role is to ensure tactical delivery of the gold strategy. This included forming a cross directorate *silver cell* who monitored resource levels, managed the stream of information and guidance being received from the government and NPCC to ensure effective implementation and using a situation report to closely monitor on a daily basis key organisational

issues such as the number of fixed penalty notices issued and sickness. The silver command also coordinates organisational learning.

5. Bronze leads were identified across every service function within the organisation. Each was responsible for preparing a risk management plan for their service area. In the first months of the pandemic the silver lead would hold a daily meeting with all the bronze leads to identify any emerging issues and seek to address them as swiftly as possible.

6. The force is also engaged in the national police response to COVID-19, Op Talla. On a regional basis meetings were held to discuss any COVID-19 issues and approaches to be taken around enforcement by forces. Any issues that required escalation were brought to the attention of the weekly Op Talla dial in meetings for resolution.

7. At the start of the pandemic the multi-agency Strategic Command Group (SCG) for the floods was being closed down and a decision was made with partners to evolve that group into an SCG around Coronavirus, chaired by the Assistant Chief Constable. The SCG is the operational arm of the Local Resilience Forum (LRF). It has a separate, but complementary command structure to the force's internal command structure. Below the SCG, Tactical Command Groups (TCG) were established in local authority areas.

## **Policing approach**

8. Towards the end of March 2020, the government published emergency legislation, in response to the pandemic, including the regulations for police powers in respect of COVID-19. In line with NPCC guidance, West Mercia Police adopted the 4 E's approach around enforcement. The 4 E's being Engage, Explain, Encourage and Enforce. Throughout this phase of enforcement officers were directed to use the fourth E, enforcement, as a last resort. Where enforcement was required officers would issue fixed penalty notices (FPNs) to individuals. FPNs were closely monitored by silver and gold and reported into Op Talla for national oversight.

9. The Prime Minister's announcement on the 22 September 2020 initiated a new phase of the 4Es approach, with a changed emphasis towards enforcement. West Mercia's position was outlined by the Chief Constable, when on the 23 September he released a public statement making it clear that anyone who chooses to ignore the regulations and restrictions can expect strict enforcement from West Mercia Police and to be given a fine.

10. Throughout the pandemic, the force has sought to provide a higher level of visible police presence within communities to provide public reassurance and maintain public confidence. The force has recently received an additional £466,243 of Government funding to support more visible policing in West Mercia around Coronavirus. This is West Mercia's allocation from £30m of national funding made available to police forces across England and Wales to increase patrols and ensure COVID legislation is being adhered to.

## Partnership working

11. A key element of the police response to dealing with the pandemic has been working with partners to provide an effective joined up response on a local level. At the Gold Heracles meetings, the Local Police Area (LPA) Superintendents provide an update on the ongoing work they do alongside the Local Authority enforcement officers, responding to concerns reported to the Police. Some examples of joint working include:

12. In Shropshire, the Shrewsbury Town Shopping Centres (council owned) and transport hub (Arriva) identified an issue with persons not wearing face coverings, as a result of enforcement led by Safer Neighbourhood Teams (SNT) in partnership with other agencies, face-coverings are now being worn and there has been a significant reduction in the reports of non-compliance.

13. In South Worcestershire, the force continues to work closely with Regulatory Services and the University of Worcester with regard to the nighttime economy to ensure common goals. This has been very positive identifying trends and tackling problem premises.

14. In Herefordshire, joint patrols with local authority licensing and trading standards on Friday and Saturday nights have issued prohibition notices to companies who shouldn't be opening during the current period of enhanced restrictions.

15. In Telford, the police Problem Solving Hub and SNTs work closely with partners to discuss, analyse and provide a joined up response. This joint working led to the early identification of the likely hotspots within Telford and a targeted approach through continuing joint agency operations in those areas.

16. 12. The initial impact of restrictions created uncertainty with partners working in specialist areas, many of whom struggled to clearly define what services they would or would not provide. This had greatest impact where vital face to face contact is required, such as visits to children in need and the elderly. As time passed, working with partners returned to a more business as usual basis and the anticipated spike in reporting in domestic abuse and child sexual abuse was not as large as feared.

17. The PCC has a statutory responsibility for the provision of victims' services in West Mercia. Throughout the pandemic the PCC's commissioning team have worked closely with service providers and the police to monitor the effect of the pandemic has had on referrals and support. In terms of demand for services, there was a decline after the first lockdown period, with referrals only starting to rise when lock down ended in July onwards. Current levels of referrals and those engaged with services are in line with levels usual for this time of year but the current period of restrictions may have an impact.

18. Sexual violence providers and Victim Support were starting to see some clients on a face to face basis but have had to cease this now. Overall, providers are seeing service users having higher needs (exacerbated by COVID etc) which they predict will manifest as a longer time in service.

19. The PCC has been able to offer additional financial support to a range of service providers by securing additional COVID-19 funding from the government. This has meant an additional £521,909 has been given in support for domestic abuse and sexual violence services, enabling them to change the way they work so that they can continue to provide support to victims.

## **Resources**

20. Under the direction of the gold lead and in line with NPCC guidance a number of officers and staff were initially moved from 'non-critical' roles to provide support to identified critical functions. This was kept under review and as demand moved back towards business as usual resources were released back to fulfil their substantive roles.

21. As mentioned, under the command structure section of this report, the silver command was responsible for tactically managing resource levels and working with bronze commanders to quickly identify and resolve resource issues as they arose. For example, the Operational Control Centre (OCC) began to receive large numbers of calls from the public to report non-compliance. To better manage this demand, an online reporting function was introduced to enable the public to report non-compliance without having to phone 101. This significantly reduced the calls into the OCC.

## **Strategic planning**

22. The PCC, Chief Constable and their senior staff meet regularly throughout the year to facilitate the business planning cycle for the force and PCC's office. The coronavirus pandemic is an ongoing public health crisis, and while it continues to impact on the whole of society the force must continue to plan to ensure it has the resources, capabilities and resources to deal with its 'business as usual' demand.

23. It is likely that the revenue from Council Tax will be adversely affected by the impact of COVID19 on the economy. Billing authorities are indicating that the Council Tax Collection Funds will be in deficit in the 2020/21 financial year as a result of reductions in the collection rate and the increased costs of the Local Council Tax Reduction Scheme. This deficit will be recovered over the following three years beginning in 2021/22 as a result of changes in legislation. It is also likely that there will be an adverse impact on the 2021/22 Council Tax Base.

24. The Chief Finance Officers and their staff in the billing authorities are monitoring this and liaising with the Treasurer to the Police and Crime Commissioner. The billing authorities are legally required in January 2021 to provide an estimate of the surplus/deficit on the Collection Fund and the Council Tax Base for inclusion in the 2021/22 budgets and to enable the 2021/22 precept to be set.

25. The Police and Crime Commissioner and the Chief Constable are considering their proposals for the 2021/22 budget and in doing so are taking into account possible scenarios relating to the revenue received from Council Tax and central government grants.

## Impact on the nature and scale of crime and incidents

26. COVID-19 has had a considerable impact on crime trends since the end of March 2020 (start of the lockdown period). There were statistically significant reductions in recording across the majority of crime type, with few exceptions (including domestic abuse (DA), drug offences, cyber crime and antisocial behaviour (ASB)). Included at appendix 1 are a series of charts which show the changes in crime. The following points should be noted:

- For the majority of crime categories, there was a steep decline in recording in April, followed by increasing trends in the proceeding months. As of quarter 2 (Q2, Jul – Sep 2020), volumes for most crime types have returned to levels seen pre-Covid-19.
- There was a statistically significant decrease in total recorded crime (TRC) in Q1 (19%). Volumes increased during Q2 but remained below the monthly average and lower than volumes in previous years.
- Following the initial decline in rape and other sexual offences during lockdown, volumes over the summer increased steadily, with recording in July and September breaching the upper control limits. Volumes have since returned to expected levels.
- Of all crime types, acquisitive crimes including residential burglary and vehicle offences saw the most significant reductions as a result of COVID-19. Following an already significant reduction in these crime types in 2019/20, there was a further statistically significant decrease in offences across both quarters following the national lockdown. During Q1, there was a 40% decrease in residential burglary and a 44% decrease in vehicle offences. Whilst volumes slowly increased across Q2, the significant decreases have been sustained and monthly volumes remain considerably below the monthly average.
- When comparing rates of residential burglary in West Mercia with 'most similar group' (MSG) forces, West Mercia is ranked 7th out of 8 (with 1st having the highest burglary rate and 8th having the lowest burglary rate).
- Immediately following lockdown, there was a small decline in reporting of DA. This was followed by a steady increase back to more typical levels; above the monthly average but within the expected range. This steady increase has resulted in a small but not statistically significant increase in DA year to date (YTD) compared to the previous year (+3% at Q2).
- Following the lockdown, the force has developed a new monthly DA product for local areas to enable partner agencies to work together to monitor the impact of COVID-19 on reporting, identify repeat victims and be sighted on any relevant prison releases.
- There was a statistically significant increase in drug offences across both quarters. The increase was driven in the main by an increase in Possession of Cannabis offences, and to a lesser extent, a steady increase in Trafficking of Controlled Drugs offences. Similar increases have been seen nationally and

across all MSG forces. It is apparent that an increase in Stop and Search activity during the lockdown period was a major responsible factor.

- Statistically significant increases in cyber offences and crime incidents were seen in 2019/20 and this trend continued across both quarters of 2020/21. Whilst increases in cyber crime and computer misuse were anticipated as a result of Covid-19, the increase cannot be contributed solely to the pandemic. Other factors including improved use of keywords in Athena and longer term trends in the changing nature of crime have also contributed to the increase.
- There was a statistically significant increase in ASB incidents across both quarters (+86% Q1 YTD; +49% Q2 YTD). This was anticipated as calls/ incidents related to the pandemic and breaches of restrictions were recorded under this category.

### **The PCC's governance and oversight**

27. Throughout the pandemic, the PCC has both provided support to the force in its approach to policing response to the pandemic and sought to challenge the Chief Constable

28. At the end of March, the PCC issued a joint statement with the Chief Constable on COVID-19 to provide reassurance to West Mercia's communities that they were working with partners across local authorities, emergency services, health and local charities. This was with a view to ensuring not only an effective policing service, but a range of other services and support mechanisms for our communities, particularly for the vulnerable and those most in need. This has included active work by the PCC to ensure appropriate PPE for West Mercia's police officers, staff and volunteers. An example of which included the Commissioner engaging with local gin producers and asking them to turn their production to high alcohol hand sanitiser. Large deliveries of these products were taken and distributed across the force.

29. The PCC is represented on the force's gold group, established in response to COVID-19 and is provided with a briefing following each of these meetings. In addition, the PCC was sighted on the Situation Report, produced by the force which provides an overview of demand, crime, resources and intelligence issues arising.

30. The PCC has lobbied MPs and ministers on both the backlog of cases within the Judicial system and the impact holding video remand hearings (VRH) has on custody resources as staff have to manage the VRHs as well as undertake their usual custody duties.

31. In April a Q & A session was held enabling the PCC to put questions submitted on the crisis to the Chief Constable. This meeting was then broadcast over the Commissioner's social media platforms.

32. Where required, the PCC's Strategic Estate Manger has supported the force to ensure buildings are being cleaned and facilities are in place to ensure force personnel can comply with social distancing. As the PCC's staff are working remotely, this has enabled the force to utilise the office space normally occupied by

the PCC's staff. This temporary measure is helping ensure police staff can appropriately maintain social distancing, while continuing their important work.

33. Most recently, the PCC has sought assurance from the Chief Constable that Operational Control Centre (OCC) performance is being managed in response to a number of staff being abstracted as a result of testing positive for COVID or being contacted by track and trace.

34. At the end of November, the PCC will be holding a holding to account meeting with the Chief Constable to scrutinise in more detail policing in the pandemic and in particular how the force has responded to and managed public expectations as the policing approach has changed.

## **Supporting Information**

Appendix 1: Crime and Incident data report

## **Contact Points for the Report**

For the PCC's office: Andy Champness, Police and Crime Commissioner Chief Executive

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## **Background Papers**

In the opinion of the proper officer (in this case the Assistant Director for Legal and Governance) there are no background papers relating to the subject matter of this report.

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

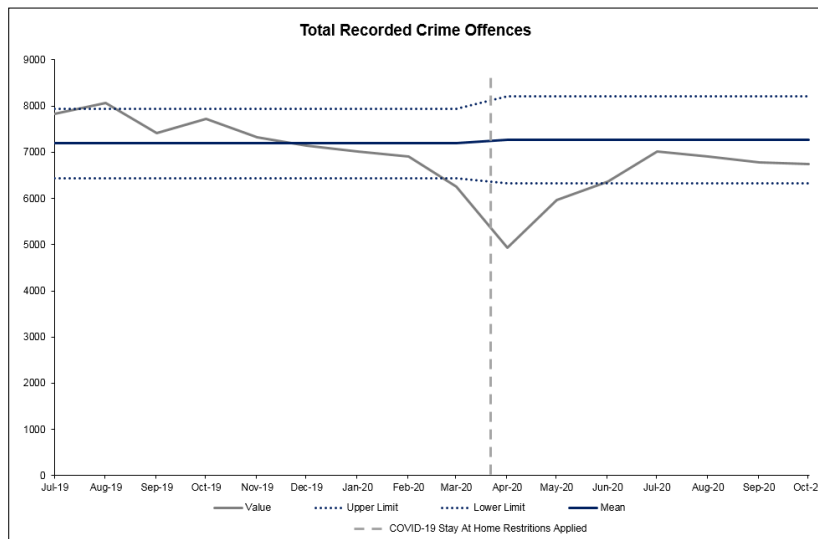
## Appendix 1: Crime and Incident data report

Covid-19 has had a considerable impact on crime trends since the end of March 2020 (start of the lockdown period). During the first reporting quarter (Apr – Jun 2020) there was a statistically significant reduction in recording across the majority of crime types with few exceptions (exceptions included domestic abuse (DA), drug offences, cyber crime and antisocial behaviour (ASB)).

The statistical process charts below show trends across key crime types. For the majority of crime categories, there was a steep decline in recording from April, followed by increasing trends in the proceeding months. As of quarter 2 (Q2, Jul – Sep 2020), volumes for most crime types have returned to levels seen pre-Covid-19. The impact of the second lockdown on crime and disorder trends will continue to be monitored through existing performance products (i.e. weekly report, monthly report, quarterly report, and SitRep document produced for the Gold Heracles Group).

Going forward, the significant impact of Covid-19 on crime recording will make comparisons to previous quarters / years extremely challenging and will do so for at least the coming 12 months. As such, caution must be taken when making binary comparisons in 2021/2022.

### Total Recorded Crime (TRC)

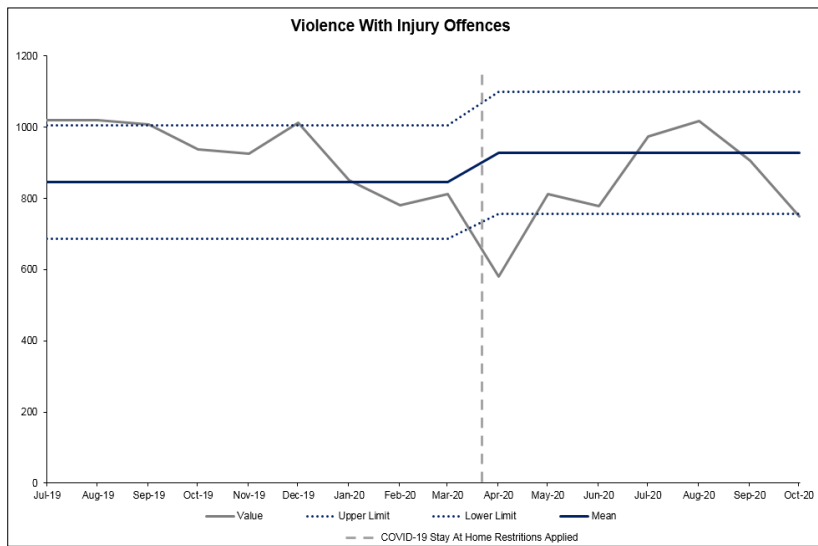


Reporting period	% change year-to-date
Q1 (Apr-Jun)	-19%
Q2 (Apr – Oct)	-16%

There was a statistically significant decrease in TRC in Q1. Volumes increased during Q2, but remained below the monthly average.



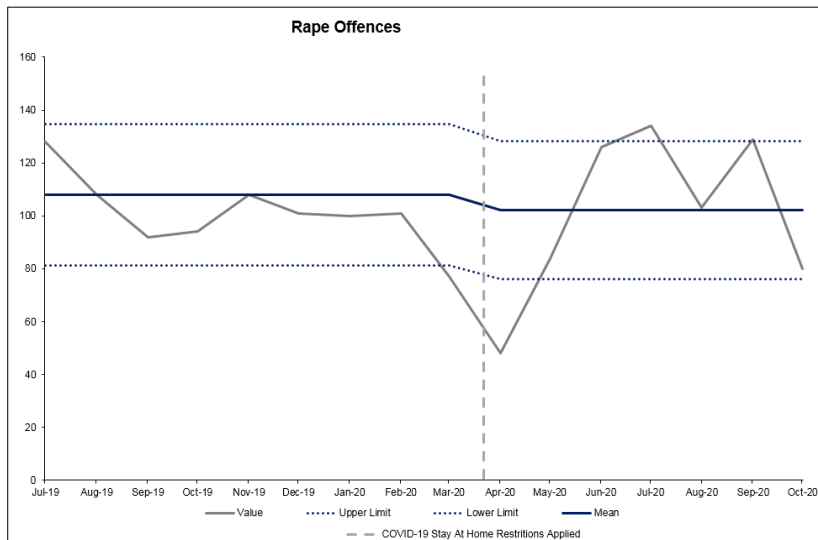
## Violence with Injury



Reporting period	% change year-to-date
Q1 (Apr-Jun)	-22%
Q2 (Apr – Oct)	-13%

There was a statistically significant decrease in violence with injury in Q1. Volumes increased within the expected range Jul-Aug, but returned to below average volumes from September.

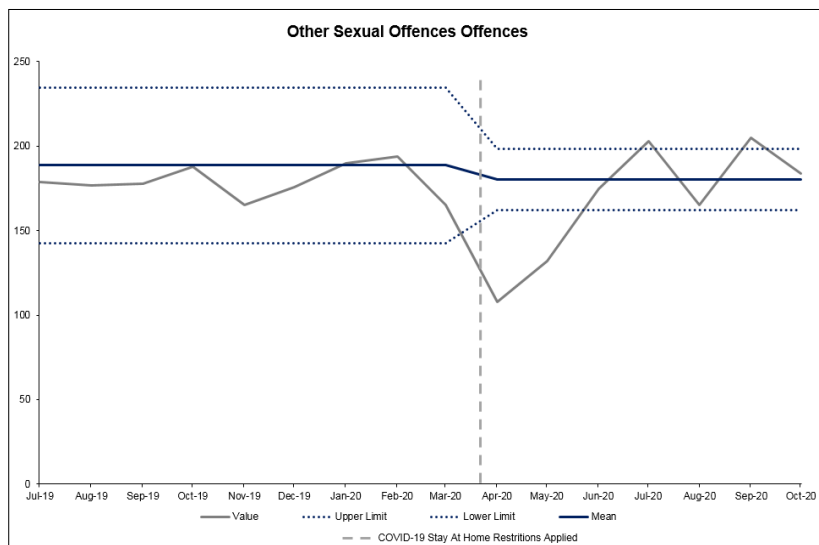
## Rape



Reporting period	% change year-to-date
Q1 (Apr-Jun)	-18%
Q2 (Apr – Oct)	-3%

There was a decrease in rape offences in Q1 (not statistically significant). Volumes increased from June and remained above the monthly average until October. Despite the increase Jun – Sep, there has been a 3% reduction year-to-date (YTD) compared to 2019/20.

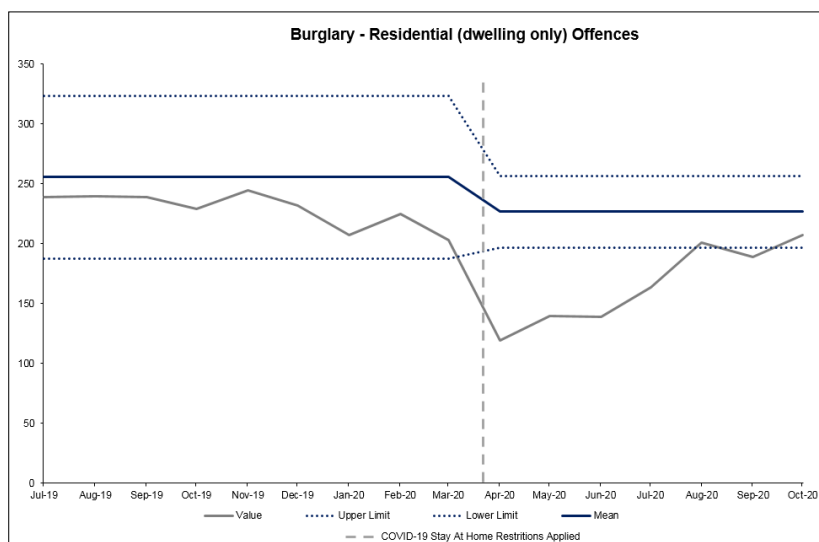
## Other Sexual Offences



Reporting period	% change year-to-date
Q1 (Apr-Jun)	-24%
Q2 (Apr – Oct)	-9%

Other sexual offences followed a similar pattern to rape offences. There was a statistically significant decrease in Q1, followed by recording of above average volumes in July and September. Volumes in October were comparable to the monthly average.

## Residential Burglary



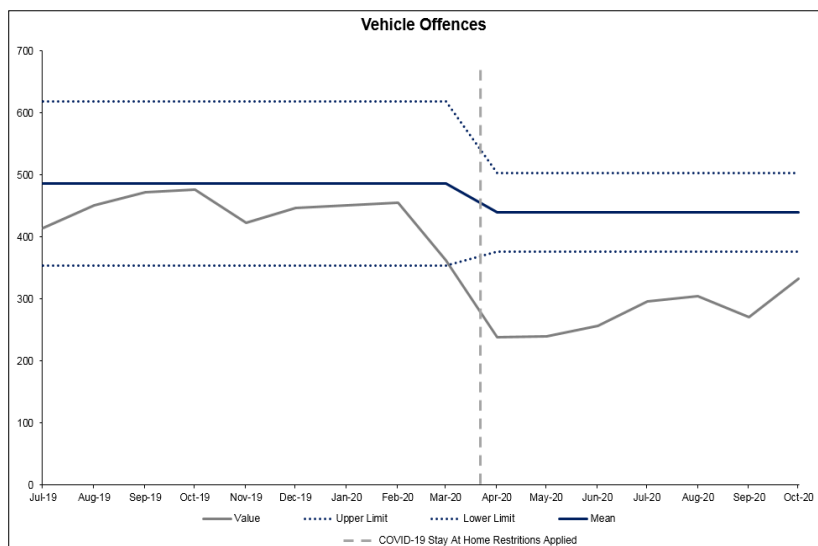
Reporting period	% change year-to-date
Q1 (Apr-Jun)	-40%
Q2 (Apr – Oct)	-31%

Of all crime types, acquisitive crimes including residential burglary and vehicle offences saw the most significant reductions as a result of Covid-19. Following an already significant reduction in residential burglary offences in 2019/20, there was a further statistically significant decrease in

offences across both quarters following the national lockdown. Whilst there has been month-on-month increases from April, volumes have remained well below the monthly average. When comparing rates of residential burglary in West Mercia with 'most similar group' (MSG) forces, West Mercia is ranked 7<sup>th</sup> out of 8<sup>1</sup> (with 1<sup>st</sup> having the highest burglary rate and 8<sup>th</sup> having the lowest burglary rate).

<sup>1</sup> Most recent MSG data, 12 months to July 2020.

## Vehicle Offences

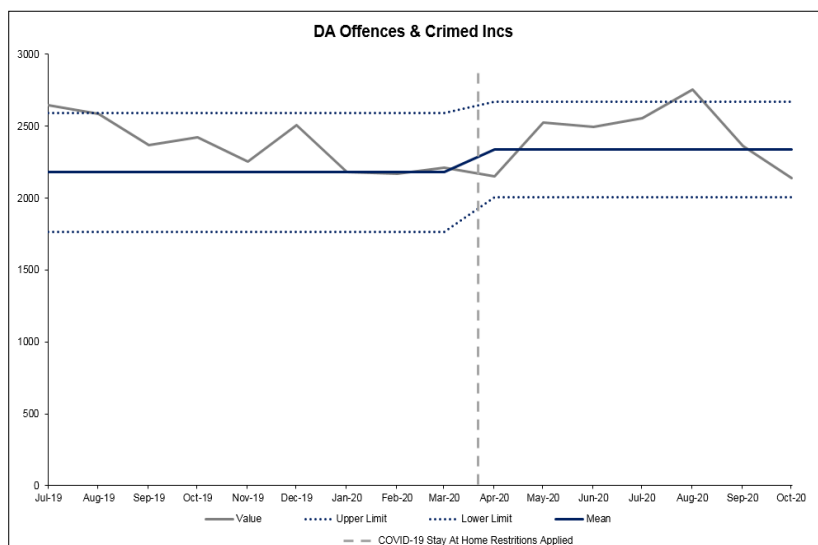


Reporting period	% change year-to-date
Q1 (Apr-Jun)	-44%
Q2 (Apr – Oct)	-40%

As set out above, acquisitive crimes including vehicle offences were most impacted by Covid-19. Vehicle offences include theft of a vehicle, aggravated vehicle taking, interfering with a vehicle and theft from a vehicle.

Following an already significant reduction in vehicle offences in 2019/20, there was a further statistically significant decrease in offences across both quarters following the national lockdown. The exceptionally low volumes were sustained despite changes to restrictions across the summer.

## Domestic Abuse (DA)

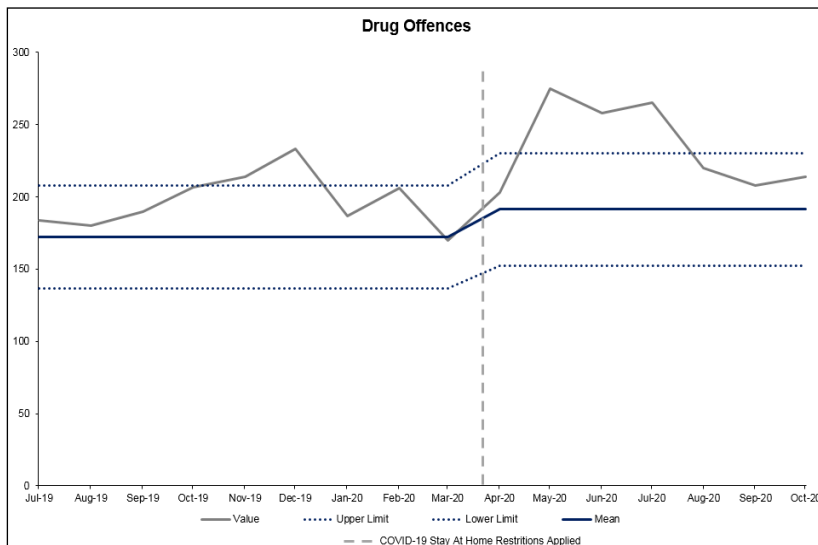


Reporting period	% change year-to-date
Q1 (Apr-Jun)	+6%
Q2 (Apr – Oct)	+3%

Vulnerability related offences did not see the same large scale reductions seen with other crime types. In fact, these crime types, particularly DA, were expected to show significant increases which did not materialise to the extent anticipated.

Immediately following lockdown, there was a small decline in reporting, followed by a steady increase back to more typical levels. Volumes remained above average until September, leading to a small, but not statistically significant increase compared to the previous year. Following the lockdown, the force has developed a new monthly DA product for local areas to enable partner agencies to work together to monitor the impact of Covid-19 on reporting, identify repeat victims and be sighted on any relevant prison releases.

## Drug Offences



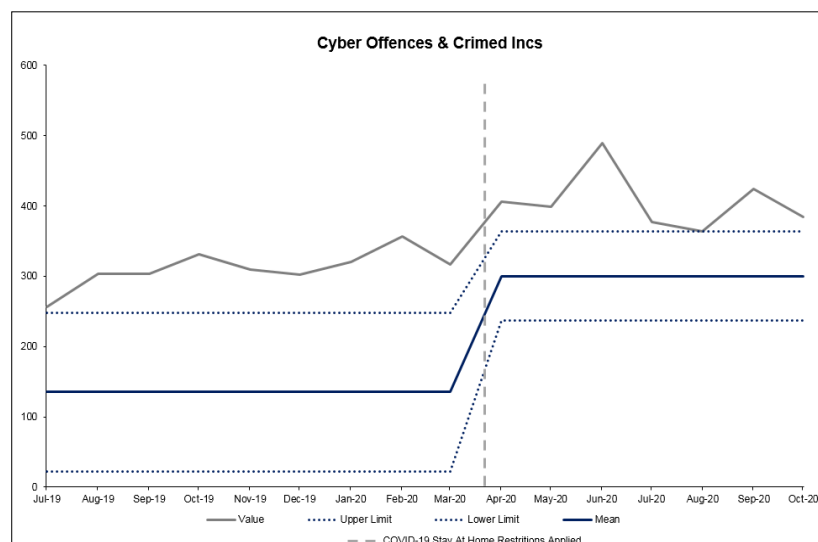
Reporting period	% change year-to-date
Q1 (Apr-Jun)	<b>+40%</b>
Q2 (Apr – Oct)	<b>+33%</b>

There was a statistically significant increase in drug offences across both quarters. The increase was driven in the main by an increase in Possession of Cannabis offences, and to a lesser extent, a steady increase in Trafficking of Controlled Drugs offences.

West Mercia is ranked 5<sup>th</sup> out of 8 within the MSG forces (with 1<sup>st</sup> having the highest drug offences rate, and 8<sup>th</sup> having the lowest drug offences rate).

Following the increase in Q1, the force commissioned additional analysis on drug offences. The analysis showed that similar increases had been seen nationally and across all MSG forces. It was apparent that an increase in Stop and Search activity during the lockdown period was a major responsible factor. A far greater numbers of searches took place during lockdown, suggesting that a combination of encouragement for officers to engage with the public and a reduction in normal police demand was responsible for more proactive implementation of Stop and Search. Anecdotally, individuals that were breaking the lockdown were both more likely to be involved in criminal activity and far easier to identify with fewer people out in public. As a result, Stop and Search produced more positives in offences that are likely to have remained undetected without the effects of lockdown. This is reflected in the high proportion of Cannabis Possession offences within the increase.

## Cyber Crime



Reporting period	% change year-to-date
Q1 (Apr-Jun)	<b>+61%</b>
Q2 (Apr – Oct)	<b>+47%</b>

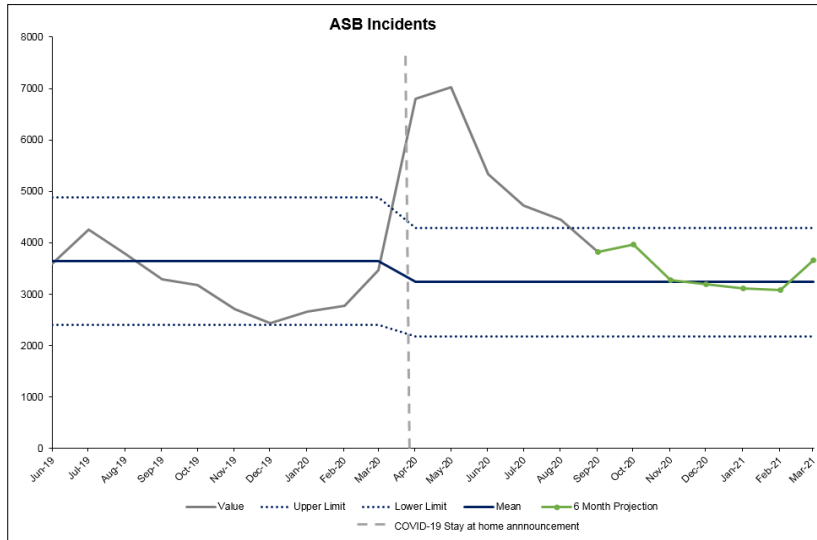
This data is generated from Athena where the keyword “cyber-enabled” has been applied to a crime.

Statistically significant increases in cyber offences and crimed incidents were seen in 2019/20 and this trend continued across both quarters of 2020/21. Whilst

increases in cyber crime and computer misuse were anticipated as a result of Covid-19, the increase

cannot be contributed solely to the pandemic. Other factors including improved use of keywords in Athena and longer term trends in the changing nature of crime have also contributed to the increase.

### Antisocial Behaviour (ASB)

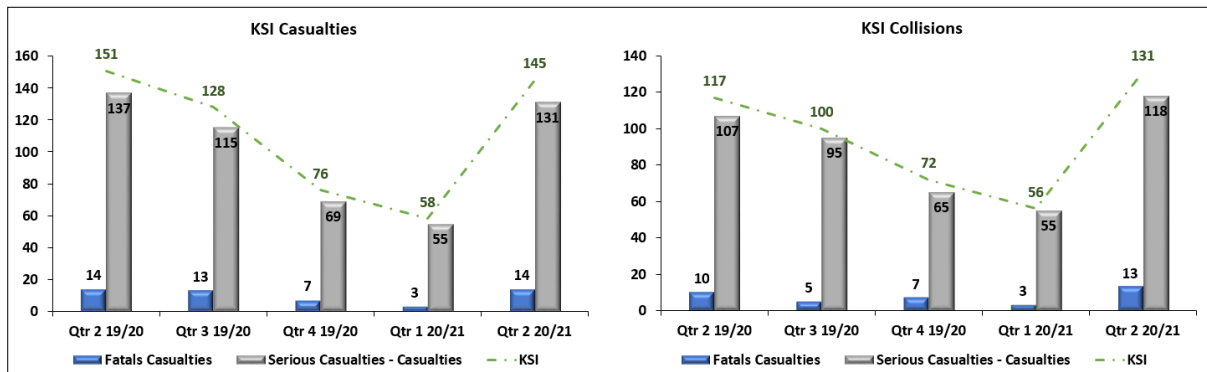


Reporting period	% change year-to-date
Q1 (Apr-Jun)	<b>+86%</b>
Q2 (Apr – Oct)	<b>+49%</b>

There was a statistically significant increase in ASB incidents across both quarters. This was anticipated as calls / incidents related to the pandemic and breaches of restrictions were recorded under this category.

It had been projected that volumes would continue to decrease and return to typical volumes seen during the autumn / winter months. However, with the country entering a second phase of lockdown, it is likely that incidents will once again increase.

### Killed or Seriously Injured (KSIs) Road Collisions



There was a significant reduction in KSI collisions and casualties in Q1. This was due to restrictions on travel, as well as fewer individuals travelling together in a single vehicle at the time of collisions. Following the easing of restrictions, the volume of KSI collisions and casualties have increased sharply and have returned to pre-Covid levels.