

Crime and Disorder Select Committee

A meeting of the Crime and Disorder Select Committee was held on Thursday 18th February 2021.

Present: Cllr Pauline Beall (Chair), Cllr Paul Weston (Vice-Chair), Cllr Kevin Faulks, Cllr Clare Gamble, Cllr Barbara Inman, Cllr Tony Riordan, Cllr Andrew Sherris, Cllr Mrs Sylvia Walmsley

Officers: Stephen Donaghy, Mark Berry (A&H); Jimmy Jones (CS); Gareth Aungiers (Xentrall); Peter Bell, John Devine, Gary Woods (MD)

Also in attendance: DI Jim Forster (Cleveland Police); Dave Mead (VCAS); Sarah Wilson (OPCC)

Apologies: Cllr Stephen Richardson

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| 1 | Declarations of Interest There were no interests declared. |
| 2 | Minutes Consideration was given to the minutes of the Crime and Disorder Select Committee meeting which was held on the 14 th January 2021 for approval and signature. AGREED that the minutes be approved as a correct record and signed by the Chair. |
| 3 | Action Plan for Agreed Recommendations – Review of Fly-Grazed Horses Members were presented with the draft Action Plan setting out how the agreed recommendations from the Scrutiny Review of Fly-Grazed Horses would be implemented, and target dates for completion. The following areas were highlighted: <ul style="list-style-type: none">• Recommendation 2 (<i>The agreed joint formal policy is made publicly available, with specific awareness-raising work undertaken with local horse-owners</i>): Though no ‘due date’ had been included, it was hoped that the identified actions associated with this recommendation would be implemented soon after the anticipated agreement of a formal fly-grazed horses policy between Cleveland Police, the Council and any other participating Tees Valley Local Authorities (i.e. April 2021). Need to be mindful that some horse-owners may not be able to access the new policy electronically, so will ensure flexible approaches are in place to share the relevant documentation.• Recommendation 6 (<i>Relevant SBC departments identify specific areas of Council land requiring a zero-tolerance approach based on location alone, along with an assessment of the resources required to support the enforcement of the new formal policy on these pieces of land and any other land where a horse’s presence poses an identified risk</i>): Due date |

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| | <p>marked 'TBC' as COVID-19 will impact on potential progress – the agreed deadline will be updated in the future once established.</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Recommendation 7 (<i>Consideration be given to arranging a future microchipping clinic in the Borough (in conjunction with the British Horse Society)</i>): Again, due date marked 'TBC' as it is currently unclear when an event will be possible. Also need to clarify the financial position of the BHS (a charitable organisation) and the feasibility of them helping to facilitate such a clinic in light of the impact of COVID-19. • Recommendation 8 (<i>An Officer network group to encourage regular collaboration (including the sharing of best practice around this issue) between the Council and relevant partners regarding fly-grazed horses be created</i>): Identified actions already progressed, with those involved agreeing to meet monthly. <p>With reference to the actions proposed for recommendation 3 (<i>There is improved presence (e.g. dedicated webpage) on the Council website around the issue of fly-grazed horses, including key (non-personal) contacts (Council and other partners) / links to guidance / tips for landowners / formal policy (once finalised), etc</i>), Members encouraged the inclusion of an educative element to the dedicated webpage, including aspects around this issue that the public should be aware of and, equally, not be alarmed by – this may help prevent unnecessary service requests, particularly in relation to the welfare of horses who may not be 'cold' (as they are usually hardy breeds who are fly-grazed) or 'dead' (when they are actually asleep).</p> <p>The Committee queried if Darlington would be involved in the Officer network group (recommendation 8) as that area also experiences a number of horses being fly-grazed. Officers confirmed that the creation of a formal policy, and the collaboration around this, would follow the Cleveland Police footprint, therefore Darlington would not be included (as they fall under the Durham Constabulary).</p> <p>Members stated that they would prefer to see a target date for all actions (even if these may be subject to change) so that organisations are working towards a definitive point – this may help avoid any potential drift. It was noted that a Government announcement outlining the proposed easing of the current COVID-19 lockdown is expected next week, and this would help with the scheduling of actions.</p> <p>AGREED that the Action Plan be approved, subject to the 'due dates' for recommendation 2 and those marked 'TBC' under recommendations 6, 7 and 8 being confirmed as soon as possible (to be emailed to the Committee).</p> |
| <p>4</p> | <p>Scrutiny Review of Fraud Awareness (Personal)</p> <p>This second evidence-gathering session for the Fraud Awareness (Personal) review considered contributions from representatives of Cleveland Police, the Victim Care and Advice Service (VCAS), and the Office of the Police and Crime Commissioner (OPCC) for Cleveland.</p> |

Cleveland Police

The Detective Inspector for the Cleveland Police Economic Crime Unit and Cyber Crime gave a presentation to the Committee covering the following:

- What is Fraud?
- Fraud Investigations
- How is Fraud Reported?
- Victim Lists
- Who are the Victims?
- Victims per month and by area 2020
- Types of Offence
- Victim Losses
- Partnerships
- Victim Awareness
- COVID-19 Effects

The Committee was informed that the act of fraud involves any one of three main elements. Most people fall foul of 'false representation', where they are duped by an individual pretending to be someone else. The second strand, 'failing to disclose information', tends to involve and affect organisations more than individuals, and the final aspect, 'abuse of position' (by someone who is expected to safeguard, or not to act against, the financial interests of another person), does impact on the individual, but is a less common occurrence.

To constitute a 'fraud', conduct must be dishonest, with an intention to make a gain or cause a loss (or a risk of loss), though no gain or loss needs to have been made. The maximum sentence is 10 years imprisonment (higher than 'theft', which carries a maximum sentence of seven years).

The Force's Economic Crime Unit is a very small team that only focuses on extremely complex cases involving millions of pounds. The Unit's dedicated and well-trained Officers also support other departments within the Force who deal with fraudulent activity (e.g. CID, Neighbourhoods, Response, Child Abuse / Vulnerable Adult (CAVA)).

Fraud differs from any other crime in the UK as it is mainly reported to a central body (Action Fraud) rather than local Police Forces. The only instances where a Force will get involved is if a reported case is identified as an ongoing or recent crime, if it involves a vulnerable victim (guidance states that Forces should support vulnerable individuals, though the term 'vulnerable' is wide-ranging), or if the perpetrator is a known local suspect (cases of which would be taken on automatically). All other fraud and cyber crime should be reported to Action Fraud who record and classify each case, provide basic victim support and advice, and pass information onto the National Fraud Intelligence Bureau (NFIB) for assessment. The NFIB will then determine which Force is best-placed to take on a case (as the crime could be occurring across multiple geographical areas).

It was noted that the dissemination of cases by the NFIB can take days, weeks and sometimes months, principally because a single call received by Action Fraud is often a very small part of a much bigger picture. Once more is known about a specific case, action can therefore be initiated.

Victim lists are sent to Police Forces once a week and contain details of victims and a summary of the offence reported. The purpose of this is to safeguard victims rather than to investigate crimes, and details of victims are shared with the Victim Care and Advice Service (VCAS) who contact individuals and offer support, and with Neighbourhood Police for any required contact / visit.

In terms of demographics, victims are spread fairly evenly between both gender and age group, though the nature of the offence does vary in relation to the latter. Young people tend to be more affected by online purchase fraud, whereas older people are more susceptible to computer service and courier fraud. It is, however, difficult to generalise as there are around 60 different types of fraud offences.

There were 2,337 fraud victims reported to the Force via Action Fraud for 2020, with Stockton-on-Tees seeing the most cases (832) during this period. However, the numbers across the four Tees Valley Local Authority areas appear to be aligned with the differing population sizes, so there was nothing overly striking about these statistics.

Data on differing age groups affected by various types of fraud was outlined, and it was noted that hacking offences are mostly social media-related. Trying to quantify victim losses from an individual perspective was difficult (some people do not report, or under-report, cases), though there is a tendency for losses to be more pronounced when online shopping activity increases (e.g. nearer Christmas). On a positive note, early reporting of fraudulent activity has enabled the Force to intervene / intercept fraudsters and get an individual's money back – any efforts to encourage people to report cases early would therefore be welcomed.

Partnerships between the Force and other organisations were highlighted, particularly the relationship with banks and financial institutions who have a key role to play in the fight against fraud. A Banking Protocol was set-up locally to help educate banking staff about possible suspicious activity, though identifying this can be difficult as fraudsters are often very clever and manipulative people. However, banks have proved very adept at recognising fraud cases, and will deal confidently with a customer at potential risk and can request further support from the Force if necessary. They have prevented fraudulent activity in a huge majority of cases, though some individuals still resist advice and want to withdraw / transfer their money. Banks are also the main link to getting suspicious accounts frozen.

Further links with Action Fraud and NFIB (both of whom offer the Unit good support and facilitate access to incident rooms), as well as close-working with others including HMRC, the Electoral Commission and Local Authorities, was also noted.

Raising awareness of fraud was a constant focus for the Force, and the Committee's attention was drawn to the press release examples that had been provided to supplement the presentation slides – these were issued on an almost weekly basis and there were over a million interactions via Facebook last year in relation to fraud. The recent recruitment of a Protect Officer to enable talks to groups on fraud and reducing risk was also noted.

The impact of the COVID-19 pandemic on fraud was discussed, particularly the increased vulnerability of some people due to isolation and the rise in online activity. There had been a significant amount of personal protective equipment (PPE) fraud, not just affecting businesses but also individuals, and a definite increase in certain areas of fraud (though a reduction in others). The evolution of non-contact courier fraud was highlighted.

Referencing some further links to fraud resources (including the 'Little Book of Cyber Scams'), the most important thing the Force needed from partners is a continued drive to educate people on what to look out for and be aware of. Fraud is hard to deal with once a crime has been committed but can often be easily prevented (e.g. hang-up the phone), and this message needs to be shared through all possible platforms, not just online. Encouraging people to speak to others (family, friends, colleagues) was key, and other agencies could play a bigger role in disseminating existing resources to increase awareness of this type of crime.

The following Committee discussion was recorded as follows:

- In response to a question around whether the Force paid for Facebook boosts to reach a wider audience, it was confirmed that there was no budget for such an approach, and that Corporate Communications was the main route for raising awareness of fraud (and that the Unit are guided by them as to the best way of getting information out to the public). The current use of Facebook cultivates interest from the press which is then transmitted to a bigger audience – however, the Force is confident that a specific information drive / appeal would be supported by the Office of the Police and Crime Commissioner (OPCC) should it be requested.
- A query around banks and the recovery of funds lost due to fraud was raised (i.e. fraud cover). If individuals felt that their account / money was compromised, they were encouraged to contact their bank immediately (not the Police) – banks will struggle to do anything unless they are aware / informed.
- Regarding fraud awareness-raising to older people, the Force was asked if it had contact with the local University of the Third Age as they would be a useful way of disseminating information to this demographic. Any new avenues to circulate anti-fraud resources were welcomed, especially as a lot of material is electronic, therefore has no cost attached.
- The Committee questioned whether companies (e.g. Amazon and BT) do anything themselves to reduce risk for individuals who use their services.

Whilst such organisations do have measures in place to respond to and prevent fraudulent activity, and continually adapt these, fraudsters are also constantly changing their methods of attack.

Victim Care and Advice Service (VCAS)

The Victim Care and Advice Service (VCAS) provides free, independent and confidential support for victims and their families throughout the Cleveland and Durham areas, helping them to cope with the immediate impact of a crime and assist in their subsequent recovery. The service is managed on behalf of the respective Police and Crime Commissioners by Safe in Tees Valley (a local registered charity), and the VCAS Service Manager gave a presentation to the Committee in relation to the following:

- ONS England and Wales Crime Survey (published 3rd February 2020)
- How do criminals target us?
- Types of fraud
- Common myths surrounding fraud
- Fraud... the personal cost
- VCAS response
- Call blocker initiative

Members were informed that fraud was causing a significant impact across Cleveland when the service was introduced. As demonstrated by the recently published ONS crime survey across England and Wales, fraud remains hugely prevalent nationwide, totalling 44 million cases (a 27% increase on the previous year), with a cost to the UK economy of £130 billion per annum.

The way in which people are targeted by fraudsters was outlined. Being deceived into passing-on information was a common characteristic, and a National Insurance number in the hands of a criminal is very useful (e.g. gateway to an older person's pension funds). Members were pointed to the www.havebeenpwned.com website which can help determine if an online account has been compromised, something which was a feature of a recent Virgin Media hack that affected a number of older residents. In relation to COVID-19, there were large HMRC scams circulating around March-May 2020 regarding alleged unpaid tax. Statistics show that if a person becomes a victim once, they will be targeted again (their information is often sold on).

Some of the common myths around fraud were noted, as was the notion that every person could be classed as 'vulnerable' at different times of their lives due to a variety of circumstances. The Committee was reminded that the latest Trading Standards data suggests that only 5% of fraud cases are actually reported to authorities.

The personal cost of fraud was highlighted, including fear of confiding in family and friends, increased isolation, and fear of revictimisation. Crucially though, as significant as a loss of what could be life-savings is the loss of confidence and trust that victims of fraud suffer.

Support provided by VCAS was detailed, with staff working seven days a

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| | <p>week at the Cleveland Police HQ. A personal service was still being provided despite the pandemic, albeit within the current safeguarding / social distancing environment, and the first online Friends Against Scams presentation took place earlier this week which was very successful.</p> <p>Finally, the call blocker initiative involving the installation of devices into victims' homes was noted. Blocked calls can be monitored and reported into the NFIB to have rogue numbers deleted. Around 2,300 'bandit' calls are blocked per month involving identified criminal calls from around the world.</p> <p>The Committee commended the work of both VCAS and Cleveland Police in their efforts around an issue which was a sad reflection of the modern world. Members also highlighted telephone preference services which can aid in reducing nuisance calls and supported increased interaction with the public around fraud crime. Stronger sentences for perpetrators would also help.</p> <p><u>Office of the Police and Crime Commissioner (OPCC) for Cleveland</u></p> <p>The Commissioner's Officer for Consultation and Engagement (who leads on fraud) was in attendance to provide the following verbal submission on behalf of the Office of the Police and Crime Commissioner (OPCC) for Cleveland:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • The principal role of the OPCC in relation to fraud is as a commissioner of services (it is a statutory duty of OPCCs to commission victims services), and to this end, the Office provides funds for both Cleveland Police and VCAS for operational delivery. • A key aspect of the existing OPCCs Police and Crime Plan is the continued drive for a better deal for victims. Most OPCC staff have had fraud training and the 'Scambassador' role (raising awareness of fraud and scams) of the former Police and Crime Commissioner (PCC) was noted. • The OPCCs social media channels advertise a lot of fraud-related material and a 'Cleveland Connected' service (used by the OPCC and the Force) can be subscribed to which provides alerts around crime prevention – approximately 12,300 people are currently registered (confirmed after the meeting). • Regional work with counterparts in Durham and Northumberland takes place and the OPCC was involved in the collation and production of the 'Little Book of Big Scams' for community distribution. <p>Members concluded this session by praising the OPCCs vital role in commissioning local services.</p> <p>AGREED that the information be noted.</p> |
| <p>5</p> | <p>Work Programme 2020-2021</p> <p>Consideration was given to the Crime and Disorder Select Committee Work Programme for 2020-2021. The next Committee meeting was scheduled for the 11th March 2021 and was likely to be an informal session to consider the summary of evidence in relation to the Fraud Awareness (Personal) review,</p> |

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| | <p>and to subsequently formulate draft recommendations. Confirmation of the meeting plans for March 2021 would be provided to Members in due course.</p> <p>AGREED that the Crime and Disorder Select Committee Work Programme for 2020-2021 be noted.</p> |
| 6 | <p>Chair's Update</p> <p>The Chair had no further updates.</p> |

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