

## CRIME AND DISORDER SELECT COMMITTEE

### SCRUTINY REVIEW OF POLICE COMMUNICATIONS IN STOCKTON-ON-TEES (TASK & FINISH)

#### **1.0 Executive Summary**

- 1.1 This report outlines the findings and recommendations following the Crime and Disorder Select Committee's task and finish review of Police Communications in Stockton-on-Tees.
- 1.2 Authorised by the College of Policing, *Authorised Professional Practice* (APP) is the official source of professional practice on policing and can be accessed online (<https://www.app.college.police.uk/>). Police officers and staff are expected to have regard to APP in discharging their responsibilities, and included within the APP content is a detailed section on 'Engagement and Communication' which reinforces the importance, and benefits, of effective working with local communities.
- 1.3 Specific APP guidance around the subject of [communication](#) notes the multiple mechanisms available to Forces, including face-to-face interaction (surgeries, street meetings, beat meetings), working with community groups (including formal and informal voluntary organisations), engaging with under-represented groups and Independent Advisory Groups (IAGs), and, crucially, partnership-working to allow a holistic approach to improving safety / wellbeing and raise confidence in local service delivery as a whole. Use and monitoring of social media is considered, as is digitally-enabled meetings, an approach which has seen increasing appeal as a result of social restrictions associated with the ongoing COVID-19 pandemic.
- 1.4 At a local level, the 2019 inspection of Cleveland Police by Her Majesty's Inspectorate of Constabulary and Fire & Rescue Services (HMICFRS) identified six causes for concern, one of which was about engaging with the public and external scrutiny of the Force. HMICFRS found that the Force did not encourage a culture that valued engagement with the public and did not use its communication channels effectively. It had an engagement strategy that the workforce did not widely understand or apply, and this meant it was not giving local people the opportunity to voice their needs, concerns and preferences.
- 1.5 Cleveland Police and Crime Panel had previously established a Task and Finish Group to examine the existing communication methods of Cleveland Police with / between the public and other local stakeholders. As a way of informing the Cleveland-wide work around the Police Communications Strategy, the Committee's local area-based task and finish review would focus on information-sharing and communications in Stockton-on-Tees between neighbourhood policing, local Ward Councillors, local residents and other key stakeholders. The review would seek to ensure that appropriate information-sharing mechanisms were in place with a view to strengthening effective partnership-working within the Borough.

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- 1.6 The Committee's Task and Finish Group found that numerous engagement mechanisms are used by Cleveland Police, both internally and externally, in order to carry out and communicate its core functions. Central to this is the small, yet proactive, Corporate Communications Unit whose overarching remit is to raise awareness and promote the Force's activity across the Cleveland area. From a wider organisational perspective, a *Communications and Engagement Strategy 2020-2025* provides a five-year vision for effective internal and external engagement, a key aspect of which is to support positive stakeholder relationships.
- 1.7 Whilst this review principally focused on communications between Cleveland Police and Councillors / the public, the Task and Finish Group were made aware of the large reach of internal Force communications – this therefore provides an opportunity to reinforce the need for regular engagement with Ward Councillors who can act as a conduit between the Force and residents in their locality regarding intelligence and good news stories.
- 1.8 All Officers within Cleveland Police must recognise the critical role of Councillors as a partnership-tool with which to address policing issues, particularly as it is acknowledged that some people may be more comfortable reporting concerns to Elected Members than the Force itself. Consideration could therefore be given to the further use of external communications to strengthen Force-Councillor partnership-working (highlighting examples of positive engagement leading to direct action and good outcomes).
- 1.9 The use and reach of social media is much valued by the Force, though such platforms also create challenges around perceptions / false stories which contribute to negativity about the Borough (requiring further work to address). Although there are benefits in using technology as a means of seeking intelligence, promoting services and celebrating successes, such platforms continue to bring less desirable effects, an understandable source of frustration for those trying to present what is actually happening across the Borough regarding the prevalence of crime.
- 1.10 The Group was keen to reinforce the crucial communications feedback-loop which, if effective, enables confidence to be built between the Force and Councillors / the public. Whilst acknowledging resource limitations, a focus on ensuring robust mechanisms are in place to update those who report or experience crime / ASB (as regularly as agreed), even when there has been no significant developments around a case, is encouraged.
- 1.11 The Force's Corporate Communications Unit continues to face a real challenge in light of well-publicised recent, and historic, issues concerning Cleveland Police which has impacted upon its reputation and standing amongst local residents. For some time now, the Force has seemed to be in a constant state of change, with Officers across all ranks arriving and departing at a concerning rate which inevitably impacts upon the ability to forge relationships within communities. Ensuring Councillors are kept up-to-date with any changes of Force personnel / oversight (including all relevant contact details, as well as escalation points) within their Ward's should be a high priority in order to maintain open communications lines that will assist in tackling crime and ASB across the Borough.

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- 1.12 As with many other organisations, the COVID-19 pandemic has both adversely impacted existing processes and accelerated new ways of working, particularly through the increased prevalence of remote contact. Whilst the offer of alternative methods of communicating are to be embraced, being as physically visible within Wards as possible will continue to be important for Councillors (as evidenced with the Ward Councillor survey) and their residents (as reflected in the desire for more Police visibility via recent consultations) as the Force looks to deliver strong engagement as part of its service plans.
- 1.13 Central to any engagement with the local population, PCSOs have been, and will continue to be, key players in providing robust communications with Councillors and their residents as part of the Force's neighbourhood policing model. That said, the public continue to raise concerns around the limited powers PCSOs have, a perception which is amplified in light of a lack of PCs to cover each separate Ward. As efforts continue to raise Police numbers, providing greater awareness of the role of PCSOs within communities may assist in managing public expectation and also raise their profile as a crucial part of the police function, particularly around their status as a vital initial contact within a neighbourhood.
- 1.14 The results of the Ward Councillor survey, undertaken as part of this task and finish work, demonstrate a varying degree of satisfaction with past and current communications arrangements. Whilst some good examples of positive engagement with the Force were received, familiar concerns around a lack of Officer visibility and turnover alongside limited information-sharing and feedback on cases was also shared. Worryingly, closer analysis of responses when compared to Ward crime / ASB prevalence showed that those areas with the highest (and, curiously, the lowest) number of reported incidents had the most concerns in relation to Force communications.
- 1.15 As the public continues to adapt to living with COVID-19, the Group welcomed the Force's positive intent around increasing purposeful engagement, including the resumption of regular attendance at Councillors' Ward Surgeries and Community Safety Partnership meetings, making its bi-monthly newsletters more Ward-specific, and the potential introduction of out-of-area reporting clinics (for those who fear reprisals from individuals committing crimes and ASB within their neighbourhoods). The Group, however, remains mindful that such endeavours are undertaken against an ongoing backdrop of stretched resources that must be directed towards areas of greatest impact – this will inevitably leave some Councillors and members of the public with the, somewhat unfair, impression that the Force does not take concerns seriously (as seen within both consultation and Ward Councillor survey responses).
- 1.16 The reported strengthening of relationships between Cleveland Police and Stockton-on-Tees Borough Council during the pandemic is hugely encouraging and is a helpful starting point with which to build firmer links with all Elected Members across the Borough. Survey responses demonstrate a conflicting range of experiences when it comes to Force-Councillor relationships, therefore much work clearly remains to ensure a consistent approach that will benefit both the Force and the public in identifying, addressing and, crucially, communicating crime and ASB concerns for the betterment of all residents within Stockton-on-Tees.

### **Recommendations**

The Committee recommend that:

- 1) **Any scheduled reviews of Cleveland Police's 'Community Engagement Strategy 2020-2025' document factors in the key findings and recommendations from this review.**
- 2) **As part of the future communications protocol / agreement between Cleveland Police and SBC Ward Councillors:**
  - a) **Cleveland Police promotes the need for regular and Ward-specific engagement with Stockton-on-Tees Borough Council (SBC) Ward Councillors amongst its internal workforce (including the provision of information to Elected Members which is relevant to their particular Ward);**
  - b) **Cleveland Police and SBC use their various public-facing communication platforms to raise the profile of Force-Councillor partnership-working (highlighting examples of positive engagement leading to direct action and good outcomes);**
  - c) **Expectations around the physical visibility of police officers (i.e. Ward Surgeries, partnership-meetings, resident meetings) be re-established between Cleveland Police and all SBC Ward Councillors;**
  - d) **PCSO contacts for each Ward be reinforced to all SBC Ward Councillors, along with relevant escalation points if a PCSO is unavailable for any reason;**
  - e) **Consideration be given to using available platforms to raise the profile of PCSOs and their crucial part in the policing function (providing clarity on what they can and cannot do, including their use of social media as a communication tool);**
  - f) **Cleveland Police provides a response to concerns raised within the SBC Ward Councillor survey (undertaken as part of this review), with specific reference to what it is doing to promote better engagement in those Wards where Councillors have expressed dissatisfaction with existing communications arrangements.**
- 3) **Cleveland Police ensures robust mechanisms are in place for victims of crime / ASB which:**
  - a) **provides clarity on the expected communication process between Force and victim;**
  - b) **ensures updates are provided (as regularly as agreed with each individual victim) regarding the progression of investigations, even when there have been no developments.**
- 4) **The SBC Ward Councillor survey is repeated in approximately 12 months to gauge developments around Cleveland Police-SBC Ward Councillor communications arrangements.**