

SE4. Police Scotland – Falkirk Area Performance

The committee considered a report by the Director of Corporate and Housing Services presenting the latest performance report on behalf of Police Scotland.

The convener began by thanking Chief Superintendent Gibson for his regular updates to members on police performance throughout the pandemic.

In introducing the report, Chief Inspector Stewart explained that the model for local policing was much the same to that outlined in the previous report, with operational officers based in Falkirk and Grangemouth, who respond to 999 and 101 calls. There was also a strong Community Policing Team which were based out of Falkirk, Grangemouth and Larbert, which played an important role in engaging with partners and offenders. There was also a team of core officers who focused on tackling domestic abuse.

In the past 12 months, local police had taken a proactive approach in community policing, with efforts to tackle violent crime, drugs and disorder, which were of greatest harm to communities across Falkirk. Chief Inspector Stewart reported that this approach was paying dividends in the performance stats. For example, there had been a significant increase in drug activity with 82 warrants being executed – which equated to one a week. These warrants were the culmination of much intelligence work by officers and working with communities to recovery drugs and the proceeds of such dealings. Whilst enforcement was one aspect of tackling drug-related crime, police were also determined to play a role in reducing the harm of substances; as such, they have sought to build good working relationships with local drug recovery services, which included joint patrols and inviting them on some search warrants.

A major threats/challenge for local police in tackling drug trafficking was county lines. County lines is the term used by police to describe the approach taken by gangs and criminal networks from urban areas, who travel to more rural locations to sell drugs. Gangs typically used children and vulnerable people to deliver drugs to customers and this often involved deception, intimidation, violence, debt bondage, and/or grooming. In December 2019, intelligence had been received of potential county lines activity in Falkirk linked to a London based Serious and Organised Crime Group. Information had been received that the offenders had taken up residence in a premises in Falkirk in what appeared to be ‘cuckolding’ scenario. Local officers had reacted swiftly to this, identifying the criminals, recovering £3,000 of drugs and apprehending the offenders who were remanded in custody. This swift intervention protected a vulnerable person and demonstrated to the group that Falkirk would be a hostile environment for them. Since this intervention, no further reports or information had been received.

Local police had also focused attention on antisocial behaviour and disorder, which could take many forms, with disputes between neighbours taking up significant time. Officers had developed innovative practices and continued to promote good partnership working; for example, a full time Police Officer was embedded in the Council's Conflict Resolution Service.

Domestic abuse continued to be a major priority for Police Scotland across the country. Recent legislation noted that domestic abuse included coercive behaviour, not simply violence. In Falkirk there was a dedicated team of officers who had one focus: tracing outstanding offenders for criminality associated with domestic abuse.

Chief Inspector Stewart gave an overview of performance data from April 2020, and how it compared to April 2019. Violent crime was down 10%, with serious assault down 12%. There had been a significant decrease (46%) in theft from housebreaking, with Covid likely to have had an impact. There was an increase in domestic abuse; whilst this could be explained away as evidence of victims having greater confidence to report crimes, and the impact of the new legislation, equally the impact of Covid and people spending more time together cannot be ignored.

Finally, Chief Inspector Stewart highlighted that the pandemic has given police significant powers around people's lives/freedoms/right. Officers were keen to engage and educate the public with partner organisations; enforcement must be a last resort. He reported that during the national lockdown there had been a very high level of compliance, with only a small minority of episodes requiring police to take action.

Chief Superintendent Gibson briefly commented on the increasing demands and strains that Police Scotland had faced over the last 6 months. From 1 March to 30 September, Police Scotland have received 1.3 million calls from the public. On one occasion, over 10k non-emergency calls were logged in a 24-hour period. Whilst greater engagement with the police is always a good thing, he used these stats to explain their decision making around how police respond to calls.

During questions, the committee asked about a 1175% increase in the number of detections for Consuming Alcohol in a designated place. This significant increase was in part due to the proactivity of officers in clamping down on such behaviour.

In response to a question on improving public satisfaction ref. updates relating to reports/complaints, Chief Superintendent Gibson explained that this is something that he was keen to resolve. During Lockdown, electronic devices had been rolled out to officers across Forth valley, including every officer in Falkirk. This allowed officers to remotely to access email and make phone calls. Whilst not the whole solution, he felt this ability to operate a mobile office would help officers to engage better with communities.

The committee had asked for further information on the 46% increase in the detection rate for sexual crimes, and Chief Inspector Stewart agreed to go back to the Public Protection Unit and find out more about this statistic. In relation to a question on domestic abuse and partnership working, it was noted that during Lockdown the police had taken part in a Chief Officers Group across Forth Valley to look at this important issue and how various orgs could work together. This was an ongoing issue, and domestic abuse remained a massive priority.

It was noted by the committee that the report did not provide comparative data on how complaints against the police compared to previous years. Chief Inspector Stewart agreed to find out why this data had not been provided, and would come back to members.

The committee asked about the police's Week of Action in May 2020 to target a range of motoring offences, including speeding, driving whilst using a mobile phone and drink/drug driving. During the campaign, 95 drivers were warned and 3 fixed penalties for speeding were handed out. Why were there not more fixed penalty notices issued? Chief Inspector Stewart explained that this was most likely due to the speed at which those drivers were doing – it did not reach the threshold for further action.

Members asked about the efforts being taken to keep police officers safe from Covid, and it was noted that, just like all organisations across the country, practical measures including the use of disposable masks and social distancing were being implemented and monitored closely.

Decision

The Committee noted the report.