

<b>TITLE</b>	<b>Covid-19 pandemic - Community Safety Response</b>
<b>FOR CONSIDERATION BY</b>	Community and Corporate Overview and Scrutiny Committee on 22 September 2020
<b>WARD</b>	None specific;
<b>LEAD OFFICER</b>	Director, Communities, Insight & Change - Keeley Clements

## **OUTCOME / BENEFITS TO THE COMMUNITY**

The report highlights the effects and the council's response in relation to the community safety agenda to the Covid-19 pandemic.

## **RECOMMENDATION**

That the Committee consider the report relating to the Council's Community Safety response to the Covid-19 pandemic

## **SUMMARY OF REPORT**

The effects of Covid-19 pandemic have been wide-ranging and a number of services have continued to be delivered to respond to concerns about crime, anti-social behaviour, compliance with Covid regulations and other issues that impact on the community safety agenda.

Lockdown restrictions led to a decrease in some types of crime such as residential burglary as homes were occupied for longer. However, living in close proximity for extended periods combined with periods of good weather led to an increase in anti-social behaviour and concerns about compliance with the lockdown and social distancing rules.

This report has been prepared with input from our Community Safety, Localities, Place and Environmental Health Teams and summarises some of the impacts and the actions taken by the council with our partners to keep residents safe and reduce the impact of crime and anti-social behaviour.

## **Background**

Ensuring Safe, Strong Communities is identified as a priority in our Community Vision. One of the main aims of the council is helping our residents, businesses, and communities to both be and feel safe. The effects of Covid-19 pandemic have been wide-ranging and a number of services have continued to be delivered to respond to concerns about crime, anti-social behaviour, compliance with Covid regulations and other issues that impact on our wider community safety.

## Analysis of Issues

Police recorded crime April to June 2019 compared with April to June 2020 lockdown period.

Crime Type	April - June 2019	April - June 2020	% Change	Change Actual
All Crime (excl. fraud)	1712	1709	+0%	-3 
Residential Burglary – Dwelling	62	38	-39%	-24 
Burglary – Sheds/Garages	23	29	+26%	+6 
Violence with injury	164	180	+10%	+16 
Domestic Abuse Recorded Incidents	182	174	-4%	-8 
Domestic Abuse non recorded Incidents	121	48	-60%	-73 
Drugs offences Possession*	54	60	+11%	+6 
Criminal Damage	229	183	-20%	-46 
Theft of Vehicle	50	38	-24%	-12 
Theft from Vehicle	107	55	-49%	-52 
Hate Crime*	78	101	+29%	+23 

\* Hate Crime includes Racially or Religious Aggravated Crimes, incidents recorded as crime and non-crime occurrences of Racist, Religious, Homophobic, Transphobic and Disability incidents.

The key crimes affected by Covid19 were burglary and theft from a vehicle which significantly reduced over the lockdown period as residents remained at home reducing the amount of properties being left unoccupied for any period. As only essential car journeys were permitted, the reduced numbers of organised groups traveling to the borough to carry out these crimes were also thought to be a factor. Since the easing of the lockdown burglary has begun to see some small increases. Crime reporting is discussed at our multi-agency Community Safety Partnership meetings and a monthly problem-solving tasking group. A working group is also being established specifically to review the impact of Hate crime.

### Domestic Abuse

There has been a rise in the number of calls being received by the National Domestic Violence Helpline (approximately 40% increase). Some areas and larger cities and towns, including London, have reported increases. Data from European countries tells us that once lockdown measures were relaxed there has been a spike in the number of reported incidents and victims coming forward seeking help.

Locally we have been monitoring the situation very closely. With weekly multi-agency meetings with our commissioned local service provider Berkshire Women's Aid (BWA), Thames Valley Police (MARAC Chair), and the Berkshire West Clinical Commissioning Group Safeguarding Lead. The current picture locally is stable. The local service provider has not seen any unusual levels of increases in victims coming forward for help.

Thames Valley Police incidents, whilst stable through the main lock down period have started to see an increase in the number of crime reports. Increased demand was planned for with our local service provider who redeployed internal staff in readiness. In addition to this.

- Communications have been ramped up via our local campaign with information being sent out on all media platforms giving victims information about how and who to contact.
- In partnership with Thames Valley Police we have rolled out DA awareness training for supermarket staff on indicators of DA and information about our local service provider to distribute at till points in supermarkets.
- Work was also being undertaken with local pharmacies on providing a safe space for victims to make phone calls and disclosures.
- Front line WBC staff including social work professionals and housing have received up to date webinar-based training on safety planning and keeping victims practically safe during lockdown (safety planning).
- WBC Housing Team fitted out temporary accommodation in anticipation of victims making approaches for emergency housing in the forthcoming weeks and months.
- A borough wide needs assessment has recommended a dedicated Domestic Abuse post to take forward essential service improvements, Funding has been identified to establish this role until April 20 and a growth is being sought to establish a permanent role.

Our Home Refuge Service for victims of domestic abuse where the perpetrator no longer lives with them had an additional 20 referrals compared to 5 for the same period from last year. Referrals came from Berkshire Women's Aid, Social Workers and also self-referrals. The service adds security equipment to the house which can range from something as simple as a padlock on a gate, up to security lighting and changing locks

### **Parks and Open Spaces**

Given the warm weather and other lockdown restrictions parks and open spaces became popular destinations. This was further exacerbated once people were able to travel for leisure activities and gave rise to concerns about overcrowding and compliance with social distancing requirements.

The council put up signage, markings, undertook countryside patrols and communications to encourage social distancing and avoid overcrowding. Parking was initially restricted in some locations that were subject to overcrowding such as Dinton Pastures. Problems with inconsiderate parking in residential areas close to some parks required regular monitoring and liaison work with the police to ensure that residents could still access their homes safely.

In addition several of the boroughs parks and green spaces experienced increased levels of anti-social behaviour. This has included drinking, setting fires, BBQ's, playing loud music, jumping into lakes and gathering in these spaces until the early hours of the morning. Whilst the issues have now abated in some locations, others have continued

to cause nuisance and annoyance to residents in close proximity. The continued hotspot locations have been escalated to the multi-agency problem solving tasking group (PSTG) locations have been put on police patrol plans and been subject to ongoing police operations.

The Covid-19 pandemic this has been a challenging time for Thames Valley Police. Over the last few months the majority of neighbourhood police officers have been taken away from their normal duties to support the response teams due to shortages limiting the ability to respond to some chronic ASB problems.

### **Play Areas**

The Council operates 99 play areas across the borough. During lockdown all of these had to be closed to the public with new signage installed. Despite being closed, all the play areas had to continue to be inspected each week to maintain the Council's health and safety obligations. The Council also supported the 17 town and parish councils with advice and signage to close their play areas.

In July, the Council reopened its play areas. This included a specific safety assessment of each play area and new signage being installed to remind residents of how to use them safely.

### **Housing - Anti-Social Behaviour**

Complaints about residents breaking lockdown regulations saw a significant increase in the number of issues referred to the council. The majority of these were in relation to housing association properties and the non-compliance with the government regulations. This including people gathering in properties and having loud parties. A co-ordinated response to these complaints was put in place including the escalation of cases to the borough anti-social behaviour panel. Identified issues included some Registered Social Landlords (RSL) lacking robust management of tenancies and residents being unclear who and where to report issues to. Some RSL's required further assistance from our community safety team in managing cases due to the lack of capacity, staff cover issues and reduced capacity in the courts.

### **Young People Prevention and Diversion**

As part of the response to the pandemic the Community Safety Partnership recognised that young people continued to require support and diversion. This has required putting in place new ways of engaging young people who have been traditionally hard to engage. Working in partnership with Reading Football Trust we have put in place an online gaming support platform. The project which is run by football coaches playing football virtually with young people to engage them in structured support for mental health and emotional wellbeing.

### **Extremism**

The tragic events at Forbury Gardens, Reading, on 20th June 2020, in which three people died and three were seriously injured triggered recovery and rapid response work from a number of partners. This has included work with the Home Office and Department of Higher Education to look at strengthening the work already under way. Sadly, one of the victims was a teacher at a Wokingham School. Support services for staff and pupils were deployed to ensure that those affected were helped with mental and emotional wellbeing. Localities staff provided a visible presence at the school gates and in local parks for the first few days. In addition, all our local Channel Panel

(safeguarding for people vulnerable to radicalisation) cases have been reviewed following the incident.

Channel Panels are part of the government's 'Prevent' strategy, which aims to stop people becoming terrorists or supporting extremism. They are multi-agency meetings, chaired by the Local Authority, designed to identify, and provide support to individuals who are at risk.

### **Scams, Doorstep Crime and Fair Trading**

During the pandemic we were alerted to national concerns around scams and how fraudsters were taking advantage of the crisis to prey on some of the most vulnerable members of our communities. National scams have included track and trace, offers of disinfecting driveways and fake PPE equipment. Locally our numbers of incidents have been low, and we have worked with our Trading Standards colleagues in the Public Protection Partnership (PPP) to increase the communications across several social media platforms. We also undertook some work around ensuring that those being contacted by voluntary sector groups as part of the Wokingham Covid19 response had clear advice and guidance for those worried or being targeted in relation to scams.

Service requests for advice received during June included an increase in general enquiries to Trading Standards from consumers asking about their rights; a 219% increase compared to June 2019 24% of the notifications to Trading Standards related to the travel sector.

### **Illegal Encampments**

Whilst the borough did not experience an increase in illegal encampments because of the Covid lockdown, our response to them was altered significantly by government guidance on how to respond to them. To help prevent the virus spreading, local authorities were asked to tolerate illegal encampments when they occurred on their land, whilst there was no change to the way that private landowners were able to remove illegal encampments. This resulted in an illegal encampment in Woosehill being in place for a week that caused significant distress to local residents due to significant anti-social behaviour. Ultimately this encampment was removed when the impact on local residents became too great.

In response to this, the Council established a temporary tolerance site at the MereOak Park & Ride. This site was ultimately successful with a number of encampments taking place there without incident.

### **Fly-Tipping**

In line with the national picture fly-tipping experienced during the past four months (April to July) increased significantly. The majority of the tipping was household waste potentially arising from tidying up and DIY projects during lockdown. During this time, despite maintaining waste collection services, the two Waste & Recycling Centres available to Wokingham Borough residents were closed.

The inspection and clearance of fly-tips by council teams continued throughout lockdown. CCTV cameras have been installed in hot spot locations across the borough and we have issued over 70 Fixed Penalty Notices since April. Fly-tipping awareness campaigns continued on social media.

Trading Standards working with our Localities Team undertook an operation that identified 60 businesses advertising on Facebook to collect waste, 78% of those were identified as holding the necessary Waste Carriers Licence issued by the Environment Agency. Following further enquiries and contact with those advertising, 7 businesses have not responded to our request for licence details and will shortly be sent enforcement advice.

### **Noise Complaints**

There was a 31% increase in noise complaints reported compared to 2019, with an increase in those from domestic sources. As some commercial businesses are reopening and as background noise levels remain relatively low in terms of traffic/aircraft noise residents will be more sensitive to these changes so we are mindful of this when dealing with complaints and aim to encourage discussion and mediation through the easing phases. Several considerate neighbour and be kind messages were distributed via social media.

### **Bonfires**

Since the start of the pandemic our Environmental Health Team saw a large increase (622%) in bonfire complaints across the partnership compared to the same period last year. A guidance note on Bonfire Advice was produced asking residents to think of others and not light bonfires during the Coronavirus pandemic lockdown because many people at home are vulnerable and may have respiratory issues, or even be fighting the Coronavirus itself. The same information is being given to residents who contact them directly and we have put out communications about bonfires out through social media.

### **Events**

As we went into lockdown the council created an events subgroup to advise the Gold response group regarding scheduled council organised or other permitted events to ensure they complied with the Covid regulations. This work has now been included in the existing Safety Advisory Group Process to ensure that relevant parties have access to the COVID risk assessment to ensure that mass gathering, and track and trace requirements are complied with as some types of events re-start.

### **Premises**

PPP reported 119 Covid Business Restrictions enquiries and service requests across the partnership. In two cases prohibition notices were served (one was later lifted) for premises that had been opening in contravention of the regulations to close.

### **Pop-up food premises**

During lockdown, a number of new 'pop-up' food businesses operating via Facebook pages and selling into local Facebook groups. These businesses are difficult to identify as they have no physical premises and are often selling on a very small and local scale through non-traditional means.

Environmental Health officers identified a number of such businesses and although initially some were difficult to contact via phone calls and emails, we have been able to contact them successfully via Facebook messenger and they submitted their food registrations. They also posted out a number of social media messages on Facebook and Twitter reminding those who are thinking of starting, or have recently started, a new food business what their obligations are and how to contact Environmental Health to register as a food business.

## **Premises Re-opening**

On 15th June, some non-essential premises were able to re-open and PPP officers visited town centres to see how the re-opening went.

To help businesses a Covid 19 Tool Kit was developed and overall, it was felt the premises were well prepared for their new responsibilities.

On Saturday 4th July, the day premises such as pubs and restaurants were permitted to re-open, officers from Licensing, Trading Standards and Environmental Health carried out patrols in partnership with TVP in Wokingham and Woodley town centres.

The officers considered the use of outdoor space, noise from people congregating, any music issues, how social distancing was being managed indoors/out and the logging of contact details for Test and Trace.

Since 6th July, Health and Safety patrols have been carried out for two days a week in Twyford, Woodley and Wokingham town centre. Officers have been observing cafes/restaurants/bars/pubs and shops and offering advice as needed. This has been an ideal opportunity to promote our Covid 19 Toolkit and check on Covid 19

Further, these visits to the main retail and hospitality centres gave the opportunity to check that those premises still meant to be closed, such as nail bars and tattooists, had remained so. As of 13th July, hairdressers and barbers have been added to the list of premises being observed on patrol.

Previously the Food Standards Agency advised Local Authorities that they were to prioritise urgent reactive work and carry out enforcement revisits as required. As of mid-July, as a 'medium' priority we may now also proactively inspect higher risk premises that are overdue/due to the end of September 2020. During visits will concerns noted about lack of Covid-19 control measures and deal with these as 'matters arising' under Health and Safety legislation.

## **Conclusions**

In summary, the Covid lockdown presented some new and unexpected challenges as well as exacerbating some of the effects that we see during shorter holiday periods of good weather by continuing for an extended period. We responded with our partners to a range of challenges as they presented themselves and we will have to continue to adapt and respond as we move into recovery.

Maintaining accurate, timely and clear communications with our residents, businesses, and service delivery partners has been crucial during these uncertain and changing times. This has provided vital information on how to manage the unexpected elements of responding to the Covid outbreak, along with providing confidence that important and valued elements of Council service delivery have continued.

One common frustration with a number of issues faced during lockdown has been managing resident's expectations about what the Council is able to do in response to lockdown restrictions and some community safety issues such as low level anti-social behaviour / noise nuisances, and the separation between local authority powers and what enforcement action the police can take. In many cases it's been those issues where local authority powers are limited that have persisted throughout lockdown and caused the most interaction with councillors from the borough and town and parish councils.

A good example of this expectation gap is the reopening of shops and the management of people visiting our main town centres. Whilst the council deployed staff into these town centres to provide advice and reassurance to residents, these staff did not have the powers to force people to adhere to the Covid regulations on social distancing or wearing of facemasks. In many of the different issues explored within this report, the Council has had to manage the increased expectations of responding to the Covid outbreak using its existing powers.

## **FINANCIAL IMPLICATIONS OF THE RECOMMENDATION**

***The Council faces severe funding pressures, particularly in the face of the COVID-19 crisis. It is therefore imperative that Council resources are focused on the vulnerable and on its highest priorities.***

	How much will it Cost/ (Save)	Is there sufficient funding – if not quantify the Shortfall	Revenue or Capital?
Current Financial Year (Year 1)	n/a	Yes	R
Next Financial Year (Year 2)	n/a	Yes	R
Following Financial Year (Year 3)	n/a	Yes	R

<b>Other financial information relevant to the Recommendation/Decision</b>
n/a

<b>Cross-Council Implications</b>
n/a

<b>Public Sector Equality Duty</b>
Due regard has been given to WBC's duties under the Equality Act

<b>Reasons for considering the report in Part 2</b>
n/a

<b>List of Background Papers</b>
none

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