

Questions submitted from Cllr Julie Grocutt and Professor Adrian James – 22 January 2021

The recent reports in the media around the delays in Court cases is worrying ...

**Could the Commissioner provide the Panel with up-to-date local data and timescales?
More importantly, what does he think can be done to resolve the matter?**

I fear witnesses will be reluctant to come to court so long after events, and their testimony could be open to challenge after such a long period of time, possibly allowing for doubt to be caused.

Response

We last produced a detailed briefing on the courts' position for the Police & Crime Panel back in July. I would ask them to refer to that.

Professor James also attended the LCJB Board meeting in October when further discussion took place regarding court recovery progress.

HMCTS updated its recovery plans in September, and further developments are referenced and published periodically. For details, follow this link:

<https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/court-and-tribunal-recovery-update-in-response-to-coronavirus>

Key local updates since last time would be as follows:

The Courts recovery plans in South Yorkshire have continued and locally, very good progress has been achieved – in spite of 2 further periods of national lockdown, and South Yorkshire having been placed under Tier 3 restrictions.

Not all cases are being listed or dealt with at the same rate or volume as would be the case in normal times, because of the necessary changes that have been introduced to maintain safety, and protect lives. However, significant progress has been achieved, including:

- Crown Court – trials re-commenced and trial courts have gradually increased and by the end of this month, Doncaster South Justice Centre also being used as an additional Crown Court annex of Sheffield
- Magistrates' courts - a trials blitz took place during the Autumn and a new sittings plan introduced from November that reintroduced a broad range of business back into courts and further plans are in place to address key priority sittings in early 2021, through to September
 - As rapid progress in the courts' recovery has been achieved, adjustments have been made to planned court sessions to tackle other areas of priority
- Additional court staff have been recruited and trained to support the court's recovery

Progress of cases through the criminal justice system, from reporting to investigation and through to conclusion, rely on adequate staff and resources being available at all stages of 'the system'.

Safety First

- Courts have continued to work closely with Public Health (England) in terms of looking after the health and safety of all those who come into contact with the courts and have made adjustments in accordance with advice received.
 - Crown Court - HMCTS have carried out extensive works within the building to ensure Covid safety (i.e. safe procedures and routes for entering/moving about the building, rooms and waiting areas being marked off to show safe occupancy, appropriate covid safety signage throughout the building, Courtrooms and jury deliberations rooms adapted using Perspex to ensure jury safety and ongoing monitoring and checking of these procedures to ensure compliance); Adjusted Trial Time arrangements introduced (to stagger the commencement of trials in order to limit footfall within the precincts of the court)
 - Magistrates courts - For example, Cloud Video Platform (CVP) has been installed at the courts and is being used regularly to allow parties to engage with the courts remotely via video link where considered necessary and appropriate; carefully structured lists that limit and take account of permitted footfall within court buildings

Technology

- As mentioned above, extended use of CVP to magistrates' courts
- An enhanced video suite constructed and enabled for use at HMP Doncaster - on time – and available from the end of September with increased capacity to link prisons to courts via video
- Because of this, a remote dock has been introduced, which is helping to accommodate multi-defendant cases at the Crown Court in Sheffield
- Whilst Police-facilitated Video Remand Hearings have been scaled back since September, they remain an option available into the future and remain available for use when dealing with Covid detainees held in police custody

During the second lockdown, and ongoing third national lockdown, the courts have continued to operate without the need to create new 'holding court' lists, or creating new backlogs of work. Work has been accommodated within the existing sitting arrangements.

Further details of the work being undertaken by the courts and partners to keep the courts running, whilst at the same time addressing work that built up during the first national lockdown, has featured in various publications. For example, the Sheffield Star published a piece with the Resident Judge on the steps being taken to keep the courts sitting <https://www.thestar.co.uk/news/crime/how-legal-eagles-and-tireless-staff-are-winning-fight-preserve-justice-sheffield-crown-court-during-covid-19-crisis-3039257>

and, Sheffield's approach has featured in other web publications

<https://www.judiciary.uk/announcements/efficiency-and-safety-at-sheffield-crown-court/>

As far as the PCC is concerned, he is satisfied that the courts are making good progress in South Yorkshire. Sitting plans and court listing remains a judicial function, and all criminal justice

partners are committed and supportive of a collective recovery effort, overseen through the local Criminal Justice Board. At the same time, partners are endeavouring to ensure that justice is served and that all parties participating in court proceedings are kept safe.

The current plans are of course being continuously reviewed and reassessed as the pandemic unfolds.

How many Family Liaison officers are there in the Force, and what victims are crime are they dealing with?

Response

Roads Policing Group – 29 Family Liaison Officers (FLOs), prominently these FLOs would liaise victims of road traffic collisions. However they would also liaise with victims in the event of a major incident such as the MEN bombing.

Crime – 37 FLOs, these FLOs normally liaise in instances of murder/manslaughter (this would include a domestic homicide) and also other incidents which might significantly impact a community, for example the death/suicide of a child.

There is a good working relationship between the co-ordinators of the RPG & crime FLOs.

What support does the PCC offer in relation to funding any voluntary groups that also support victims of crime, for example the Victim Support Scheme?

Are there any special arrangements / services to support victims of domestic abuse, over and above Victim Support Services?

Response

The PCC commissions the support service for victims of crime, the service provider is the charity Victim Support. The contract was awarded for a 3 year period with option to extend for a further two years. The option to extend has been exercised and we are now in the two year extension period.

The PCC also commissions the South Yorkshire independent sexual violence advocate (ISVA) service which is delivered by a consortia of local rape crisis charities under the banner of the South Yorkshire Sexual Violence Partnership. The contract was awarded for a 3 year period with option to extend for a further two years. The option to extend has been exercised and we are now in the two year extension period.

In addition to this the PCC also contributes funding to the local domestic abuse support services in each of the local authority areas be they a contracted service provision or delivered in house by the local authority.

During 2020-21 the OPCC has bid into/secured funding from a number of external funding opportunities as were reported to the last panel. The funding has been directed to organisation which support victims of domestic abuse or sexual abuse. OPCC officers are involved in national APCC meetings to ensure that central government is aware of the local issues we face with a view to securing additional funding if possible.

The PCC has his POCA grant scheme with quarterly panel meetings throughout the year. Projects should be aligned to one of the following objectives, a number of which relate to support victims.

1. Helping victims, including children, of serious violence, domestic abuse, sexual offences
2. Helping those who are victims and survivors of child sexual exploitation and child criminal exploitation, human trafficking, slavery and hate crime
3. Helping those vulnerable to cyber and internet fraud
4. Demonstrate effective partnership working with other organisations
5. Ethnic minorities, especially BAME young people not being disproportionately represented in the criminal justice system
6. Public health approach to tackling crime e.g. knife crime or substance misuse related offending
7. Support victims and witnesses of crime throughout the Criminal Justice process
8. Assisting with the COVID-19 response

<https://southyorkshire-pcc.gov.uk/what-we-do/grants/>

Finally, panel members may be aware of the Hackenthorpe Lodge building which houses our SARC, Victim Support service triage team, two vulnerable victim interview suites and a court video link for use with vulnerable or intimidated victims and witnesses. Which was developed and funded by the PCC (the ARC part of the facility was co-funded by our partners NHS England).

Is the PCC picking up any information in relation to domestic abuse victims, e.g. the length of time they're waiting, and whether this is resulting in victims dropping charges?

The Victim Assurance work commissioned by the LCJB is currently underway, which seeks to understand the impact of COVID-19 on those victims pending trial and the service supporting them. This piece of work involves engagement with a number of key stakeholders including Victim Support, DA services, Sexual Violence Services, The Witness Service and SYP's Witness Care unit. Part of the work undertaken includes surveys for both victims and service providers and victim engagement features as part of this work.

How many Domestic Abuse officers are there in SYP, and what access do they have to support organisations for victims?

There are Domestic Abuse teams across the county in each district which come under the PVP portfolio. The DA teams consist of a mix of detective constables, police constables and civilian investigating officers. The DA teams would traditionally deal with the high risk victims, this means that duty group officers scan and deal with DA cases at medium or standard risk. There is also the Domestic Abuse Risk Assessors (DARA) team which is a forcewide resource, this team would make referrals subject to victim consent (recorded on the DASH questionnaire) to support organisations in the local authority area specific to the victim's needs and in line with their risk assessment level. Should a victim at a later point request support or change their mind about

consent the officer in the case could make a referral but would most likely revert back to the DARA team to make a referral. Should a crime be reported by a victim who lives outside of the force area a referral would be made to the force area covering their home address requesting that the victim be referred to the appropriate support agency in their area.

SYP officers can make referrals to any of the services the PCC commissions, co-commissions or to which the PCC provides funds. The contact details for victim service organisations are in the Victim Booklet used by SYP (see below link). Officers also have access to the SYP Complete Victim Care intranet site which provides other information as to support available for victims.

https://www.southyorks.police.uk/media/4661/1936_supporting_victims_booklet_sept_web.pdf