

Swyddfa Comisiynydd yr Heddlu a Throseddau, Gwent
Office of Police and Crime Commissioner, Gwent

Pencadlys Heddlu Gwent | Gwent Police Headquarters,
Croesyceiliog, Cwmbrân, NP44 2XJ

Ffôn | Tel: 01633 642 200

E-bost | Email: commissioner@gwent.pnn.police.uk

Gwe | Web: www.gwent.pcc.police.uk

Comisiynydd Heddlu a Throseddau Gwent | Police and Crime Commissioner for Gwent:

Jeff Cuthbert B.Sc., MCIPD



The Rt Hon Priti Patel MP
Home Secretary
Home Office
2 Marsham Street
LONDON
SW1P 4DF

25th March 2021

Dear Home Secretary

Impact of the pandemic on the Criminal Justice System. A joint view of the Criminal Justice Chief Inspectors on the Criminal Justice System's response to Covid-19

As required by statute, I am writing to you to respond to the joint view of the Criminal Justice Chief Inspectors on the Criminal Justice System's response to Covid-19 entitled, 'Impact of the pandemic on the Criminal Justice System'.

I welcome this report and the acknowledgement it provides to the hard work undertaken by all in the criminal justice sector to ensure the essential services we provide to the public continue whilst in the midst of a pandemic; this is a situation which no one has ever experienced before and one that could not have been planned for.

I was pleased to read the generally positive way the policing service nationally was found to have responded to the pandemic; I believe this is as a result of the strong relationships that exist on a national basis as well as locally between neighbouring forces.

I am immensely proud of the way the Chief Constable and her colleagues have led Gwent Police over the past year, developing innovative ways to deal with new and challenging situations and implementing them almost immediately. One example of this has been dividing the force control room staff into three groups sitting in distinct sites to ensure resilience so that the public would always have access to 999 and 101 services when they needed them.

I would like to thank all of the frontline officers and staff from Gwent Police who continue to place themselves in situations that could expose them to the virus and the risk that this then places on them, whilst still delivering a service to our communities across Gwent. I also want to state my support for the request that these frontline officers and staff members should be prioritised for the Covid vaccine in recognition of the potential risk associated with their work. Not forgetting those

who work in the support functions, as without these individuals, Gwent Police would not be able to support those on the frontline to do their roles to the best of their ability in this time of crisis.

The leadership by Gwent Police through the Strategic Co-ordinating Group has ensured an integrated and effective response by all our public services. The contribution of our Joint Legal Services throughout the pandemic has been exceptional, responding to changing legislation and guidance and providing revised information for our frontline officers in order to effectively respond to changing rules and regulations. Ensuring up to date information on the changes to law has been essential in promoting our criminal justice response to the public.

The Chief Constable and I have been concerned about victims of abuse, violence and exploitation throughout the pandemic, acknowledging the increased risk and vulnerability that many face during isolation and lockdown. We have been determined in our combined efforts to encourage victims and the public to come forward and report abuse and safeguarding concerns and have maintained a proactive communications and engagement approach on a Gwent wide basis. Both my office and Gwent Police have also worked with the Welsh Government and the Gwent Violence Against Women, Domestic Abuse and Sexual Violence (VAWDASV) Partnership Board to drive national and local awareness raising campaigns.

Gwent has also played a part in, and benefited from, the Wales wide criminal justice response to the pandemic. The Criminal Justice in Wales board (*formerly the All Wales Criminal Justice Board*) has implemented an all Wales steering group to resolve the evolving challenges faced collectively and individually by organisations across Wales. The group has met weekly and consists of Police and Office of the Police and Crime Commissioner representatives, Her Majesty's Court and Tribunal Service, Her Majesty's Prison and Probation Service and Crown Prosecution Service. My Deputy Police and Crime Commissioner is a member of the steering group which continues to co-ordinate our collective response and a member of my team is currently seconded in as a Criminal Justice in Wales Coordinator which has assisted further in coordinating our approach.

Consequently, through respectful and close working relationships (including those with the judiciary) and dynamic leadership, innovative, swift action was taken in Wales in response to the pandemic. This included a re-structure of courtrooms, implementation of the nightingale court, attendance of police volunteers at all courts across Wales, use of council buildings for jurors and increased use of remote evidence given at home and within designated sites. These actions have resulted in effective outcomes for victims and witnesses, including no increased delays for youth justice trials and Magistrates Courts disposing of more cases than they are receiving. Crown Courts have been operating jury trials in 80% of their courtrooms and have just successfully concluded a trial in Newport with multiple defendants. It is important to note that these outcomes and experiences have not been replicated by our English colleagues.

As highlighted in the report, one of the most significant challenges experienced have been with the courts service. Although this has now been resolved for Magistrates Courts here in Gwent, concerns remain in relation to the capacity of the Crown Courts. Although it has been acknowledged that we have not experienced the extent of the problems that some other policing areas have. Nevertheless, the delay in these cases being heard has led to anxiety and stress for victims and witnesses and we continue to look at ways in which further support can be offered. I am also acutely aware that the delays in the courts system may lead to some victims removing their support for prosecution. This is an area that continues to be of concern to the Chief Constable and me as highlighted in her comment below:

"We welcome this joint report from Her Majesty's Justice Chief Inspectors regarding the impact of the Covid-19 pandemic on the criminal justice system. The report highlights some examples of

how police forces adapted swiftly to the challenges posed by the pandemic and praises the commitment of staff across services. The acceleration of digital working and implementation of innovative solutions allowed forces to keep service levels in place, however I echo the concerns shared by the four Chief Inspectors regarding the impact of Covid-19-related court backlogs across England and Wales and we are working closely with partners to address this.”

Despite the challenges faced by staff across all criminal justice agencies, the pandemic and changes to ways of working have also produced positive results. I understand that some children have engaged far better with the Youth Offending Services here in Gwent via digital platforms than they have done face to face. There is also more joint working between Independent Domestic Violence Advisors, Independent Sexual Violence Advisors, the Witness Care Unit and victim support services, who now have weekly meetings to agree provision of support for each victim attending court as well as any other operational issues of relevance.

Here in Gwent, the investment made into our joint Digital Services Division with South Wales Police prior to the start of the pandemic placed us in a positive position and ensured that we were able to move a large number of staff to homeworking relatively easily and with minimal disruption to the services we provide. Officers have also been able to conduct their online work without returning to stations, reducing risks. We have also made progression in being able to hold Multi Agency Risk Assessment Conferences (MARAC) and Multi Agency Public Protection Arrangement (MAPPA) panels as well as multi-agency scrutiny processes digitally.

Although we are experiencing additional pressures across all criminal justice agencies, it is through the commitment of all organisations and their staff that these are limited. I am pleased to say that work continues across agencies to reduce the impact of these pressures as much as possible for the public. I give my commitment to support the Chief Constable and our partner agencies in any way I am able to, in order to ensure we tackle these pressures and that the people of Gwent continue to receive the service they expect.

Yours sincerely

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read 'Jeff Cuthbert', written in a cursive style.

Jeff Cuthbert B.Sc., MCIPD
Police and Crime Commissioner for Gwent