

# **High Level Progress Report for Police and Crime Plan 2021**

**-24**

## **February 2024**

This report is provided to members of the Police, Fire and Crime Panel to provide a high-level summary of activity undertaken throughout the implementation of the Police and Crime Plan that has worked well or shows opportunity for improvement. The report is broken down into chapters aligned with the priorities and objectives specified in the Police and Crime Plan 2021-24.

The Police and Crime Plan 2021-24 can be found here: [Police and Crime Plan - Essex Police, Fire & Crime Commissioner](#)

The chapters are as follows:

- Further investment in crime prevention
- Reducing drug driven violence
- Tackling violence against women and girls

### **Further investment in crime prevention**

***“Our objective is to invest in activities and initiatives that prevent crime from happening in the first place to reduce overall crime and keep our communities safe.”***

#### **Background**

In the 12 months to December 2023 compared to the 12 months prior, all crime is down by 5.7%, anti-social behaviour is down by 37.6%, domestic abuse reduced by 15.2%, and violence against the person reduced by 11.5%. This demonstrates the positive impact felt by the investment in crime prevention achieved since the publication of the Police and Crime Plan 2021-2024 and the successful strategic shift to prevention.

All crime has seen a slight increase compared with the pre-Plan baseline, although this is influenced heavily by the reduction caused by the COVID-19 pandemic. In the 12 months to March 2021 were 148,135 offences compared to 155,537 offences recorded in the 12 months to December 2023. Although this equates to an increase of 5.0%, the figures were heavily influenced by the Government's restrictions on gathering and movement in relation to COVID-19. The restrictions saw a reduction in crime volumes at the time of the pandemic and have influenced patterns seen since, as crime levels increased when restrictions were lifted. The recent reduction of 5.7% of all crime in the 12 months to December 2023 shows how crime is settling and reducing following the COVID-19 pandemic, and through the influence of further crime prevention. This has had a particular impact on the number of anti-social behaviour (ASB) incidents recorded, which stood at 60,329 in the 12 months to March 2021, compared to 14,970 in the 12 months to December 2023 – a 75.2% decrease. For the 12 months to December 2023 compared to the 12 months to

December 2019 (pre-Covid), all crime has reduced by 7.5%, anti-social behaviour has reduced by 64.3%, domestic abuse has reduced by 16.1% and violence against the person offences reduced by 3.9%.

### **Activity and Progress**

From 2016 to March 2021, before the implementation of the 2021-24 Police and Crime Plan, the government Police Uplift Programme (PUP) grant and the local precept provided additional funding for more than 500 officers, growing the force establishment. Since 2021, growth has continued. 2023 marked a milestone in Essex Police's development, with completion of the multi-year growth programme, bringing the total number of additional officers to 905 since 2016, with the force total reaching 3,755, making Essex Police the strongest and biggest it has ever been. It is also above the 300 extra officers committed to within the 2021 Police and Crime Plan.

Since 2016 the PFCC has increased the annual investment into Essex Police by £86m. This has been funded by an increase in central government funding, police precept, and efficiency savings. This has provided necessary investment into community policing teams, local policing, children and young people officers and town centre teams. As well as the uplift in officers, extra staff and equipment have been funded to support officers to be visible in their communities and provided them with the right resources to prevent and tackle crime.

There have been significant investments made in breaking the cycle of domestic abuse by supporting victims and tackling aggressive dysfunctional behaviour early to stop escalation. Using the pre-Covid benchmark of the 12 months to December 2019, there were 29,726 offences recorded, which shows a 16.1% reduction has been achieved comparing to the 12 months to December 2023.

Investment has also occurred in tackling gangs and organised crime, with more officers, efficient use of stop and search, and significant coordinated partnership investment in prevention largely through the Violence and Vulnerability Programme (this is explored in more detail in the Reducing Drug Driven Violence Chapter below). This has seen Education, Health, councils, and police working together to identify the vulnerable and keep them from being exploited into crime.

This broad investment across a number of priorities is part of making a strategic commitment to prevention, a shift in our main effort from rapid response into a model of targeted prevention and early intervention as set out clearly in the Police and Crime Plan 2021-24.

Since 2017, the Commissioner and Chief Constable have commissioned an independent public survey to understand and track public confidence in policing. This survey mirrored the national confidence questions used in the Crime Survey of England and Wales and has surveyed a representative sample of more than 7,000 Essex residents each year. This independent survey provides a detailed district level picture of trust and confidence across our communities, both geographically and by protected characteristics and includes analysis of victims' and non-victims' responses. This data drives localised public engagement strategies which focus on

addressing local concerns, building and maintaining effective relationships and ensuring the public have trust in their force. Since the introduction of the independent public survey for Essex in 2017, the number of people who answered “good” or “excellent” to the question, “taking everything into account, how good a job do you think the police in this area are doing?” has increased from 68.7% in the 12 months to the end of March 2018 to 73% in the 12 months to the end of September 2023. During the Covid pandemic, levels of public trust in Essex Police rose to a record high with 81% of residents stating they were confident or very confident in the force. This has fallen back slightly since the pandemic and this reduction has coincided with increased scrutiny and criticism of policing nationally.

Concerns around ASB and visibility have increased since the pandemic and the force has benefited from several national projects that it has been able to use to address these concerns. The force has been able to successfully contribute to the Government’s ASB Strategy through the PFCC’s office being awarded £1.1 million to deliver hotspot patrol activity by policing and partners in 13 areas across the county through Op Dial. This has been done in partnership with local CSPs, with high levels of public engagement and communications around this activity. This has been successful, with positive feedback from partners and stakeholders and early data showing a positive impact on public trust and a 37.6% drop in ASB recorded in the 12 months to December 2023. Additionally, pilot areas have seen reductions in high-harm crime at a significantly higher level than the force-wide reduction. In short, the force and its partners have been able to show they are addressing an area of significant public concern.

The force, through the PFCC, has also benefited from funding from the Home Office’s Safer Streets Fund. Essex secured £2,626,166 from rounds 2 to 5 inclusive, which was match funded by local authorities. Implemented in Waltham Abbey, Witham, Chelmsford, Grays, Colchester city centre and Greenstead, this has enabled significant progress to be made in tackling areas of concern within communities. The force, working through the Community Safety Partnerships, has played an active part in this work and this has helped local communities, schools and community groups take a proactive role alongside the police in helping to prevent crime.

The success of these nationally funded schemes led in the last year to the creation of a locally funded Safer Streets Fund which has helped address a number of long-term issues within communities. The PFCC has so far administered two rounds of the local fund, with £399,855 and £1,093,866 respectively committed to activities in Harlow, Clacton, Braintree, Brentwood, Chelmsford, Maldon and Rochford. The initiatives have covered locally important issues, from ASB in Maldon, car theft and fly tipping in Navestock, Brentwood, and speeding on country roads.

The allocation of Safer Streets Funding sits alongside other funding routes such as Op Grip funding, the PFCC’s Minerva Fund, ASB hotspot funding and the PFCC’s Community Safety Development Fund (CSDF). Minerva is a flagship project that was commissioned by Essex Police using Home Office Science, Technology and Research (STAR) funding and developed by Nottingham Trent University to use

open-source data, combined with Police and local authority data, to map vulnerable / hot spot locations, particularly for crimes or incidents relating to violence against women and girls (VAWG). These maps were shared with CSPs to consider what may be driving vulnerability, and to develop plans for local activity aimed at improving public confidence and safety in these areas. Success from Minerva has been nationally recognised.

## **Conclusion**

Overall, there has been significant progress made in investment in crime prevention, which is already showing signs of reducing crime. Many of the impacts can be particularly seen in neighbourhood policing and in the reduction of ASB, by providing a strong, visible presence to communities and impacting public confidence in policing. Although policing is reactive by nature, investment in crime prevention has been essential to managing and positively impacting demand, and leaves communities feeling safer. The benefits of crime prevention are often wider than anticipated, with strong neighbourhood policing, local partnerships, and collaborative working fundamental to delivery.

## **Reducing drug driven violence**

***“Our objective is to crack down on drug driven violence and gangs, protect the vulnerable people these gangs prey on and deal with the hardened criminals whose criminal activities increase violence in our communities”***

## **Introduction**

Drugs and the associated drug driven violence have a hugely negative and damaging impact on our communities. Drug driven violence, exploitation of vulnerable people, and the destructive harm caused is evident, and we have worked hard to address this serious issue. Drugs are inextricably linked with knife crime and gangs and create an increasing cycle of violence if left unchallenged, with harmful consequences.

## **Framework**

Our strategic approach to tackling drug driven violence is based on activity at three levels. At a national and regional level, we work with the National Crime Agency to tackle and reduce the number of gangs and criminals fuelling drug driven violence. We then take a robust approach, through the Essex Police Serious Violence Unit, of identifying and dismantling county lines, providing a strong, visible community deterrent through proportionate use of stop and search and other community-based activities. At the preventative level we work effectively with partners through our Violence and Vulnerability Unit by taking a public health approach and investing in activities proven to divert vulnerable people away from a life of crime.

## **Activity and Progress**

In the 12 months to December 2019, there were 10 drug driven homicides recorded, compared to two in the 12 months to December 2023 – an 80% decrease. In the 12 months to December 2023, there were 1,495 knife crime offences - 185 fewer than

the previous 12 months or an 11% reduction. This is compared to 1,638 offences recorded in the 12 months to December 2019 which, due to the shift in offence numbers and types during the pandemic, is seen as the true benchmark for pre-Police and Crime Plan comparison. Based on this figure, there has been an 8.7% reduction since the plan was published.

Organised Crime Group disruptions have been increasing, with 99 undertaken in the 12 months to December 2019, compared with 387 in the 12 months to December 2022, and 453 in the 12 months to December 2023. Violence with injury offences and knife enabled crimes have fallen by 8.7% and 11% respectively in the 12 months to December 2023 compared to the previous 12 months. Despite this, however, confidence that Essex Police and its partners are dealing with drug crime (from the independent survey jointly commissioned and funded by Essex Police and the PFCC) was at 56.8% for the 12 months to September 2023. This is a deterioration from 61.0% in the 12 months to September 2022 and demonstrates that there is still more to do to assure the public of the work being undertaken in this area.

A key development following the adoption of the 2021 Police and Crime Plan was the publication of the Essex Police Homicide Prevention Strategy 2022-26 which sets out a coordinated approach to tackling homicide and has been endorsed by the PFCC's Strategic Board. The overarching aim of the strategy is "To reduce homicide in Essex by tackling serious violence and the contributing factors that lead to homicide". Key prevention activity is completed as part of the strategy. Essex Police continues to tackle the threat posed by county lines and associated exploitation through the work delivered by the Serious Violence Unit. The Op Raptor and Op Orochi teams investigate, pursue, disrupt, and dismantle county lines that operate in Essex. The Prevent, Protect and Prepare (PPP) Team conducts work to safeguard, prevent and provide diversionary opportunities for those involved in county lines and associated exploitation. The team also delivers measures designed to prevent crime and to safeguard those that are vulnerable to exploitation.

The Serious Violence Unit has continued proactively to tackle serious violence through its Raptor teams in order to contribute to homicide prevention. The expansion of the role of Raptor Safeguarding Officers has seen an increase in those safeguarded, with 92 people safeguarded in the first quarter of 2023, compared to a 2022 quarter average of 24 - a 283.3% increase. The officers now engage with partners prior to executing warrants and conduct more work to identify those that may need safeguarding. The SVU has developed a new pilot with Open Road and Phoenix Futures that is designed to provide a partnership response during police enforcement activity targeting county lines. This pilot ensures that there is immediate access to treatment services for those that are vulnerable or being exploited by county lines. This immediate support is designed to prevent further crimes being committed, and to ensure that those who are vulnerable have an opportunity to be diverted away from criminality.

In 2022, Essex became one of the pilot forces for Op Grip, the three year Home Office programme developed to identify and fund hotspot policing for areas significantly impacted by serious violence. The Op Grip strategy focuses on

identifying and patrolling in hotspot areas within the county which see the highest harm crime being committed. With effect from 1 July 2023, there are 15 harm spots across Essex and the concept is to conduct 15- or 30-minute patrols in the hot spot areas frequently. The pilot has seen the implementation of a problem-orientated policing (POP) approach implemented in the second year and has branched out to create a 'Safe Place' in Southend. Safe Space is an initiative that is carried out within the hotspot area to work with CSPs, police and local charities to create a strong, visible presence from all partners at the same time. Centred around the night-time economy, Safe Space has had positive feedback from residents and creates a visible deterrent to serious violence, allowing them to seek support from agencies if they feel unsafe also. This approach has received positive feedback from the Home Office and has been mirrored in other areas of the country as best practice.

Although Op Grip is derived from tackling violence, including knife crime, the association between drug dealing and violence is often a close relationship. In 2023, Essex became the first force to use Op Grip funding to tackle county lines present in the hotspot areas. With this funding, a decision was made to move from focussing on street-level dealers to target those that control the lines and cause the most harm. Investment within Op Grip has seen opportunities to develop and deliver projects to wider support the objectives of the strategy, maximising our opportunities to target drug driven violence. Formal Home Office evaluation of Op Grip is yet to occur, but the Essex Police evaluation for year one shows a 7% reduction in serious violence within hotspot areas, demonstrating positive movement in the right direction. Additionally, with the shift to use funding in 2023/24 to tackle county lines in hotspot areas, early indications show that compared to the 2022/23 arrests, more individuals have committed previous high harm or serious violence offences. Of the 559 arrested in 2022, 22.2% had two or more high harm indicators from previous offences, compared to 67.8% of 497 arrests made in 2023.

The Essex Violence and Vulnerability Unit, established in 2019, prior to the national drive around violence reduction units, has also been essential to tackling the growing threat of county lines, drug driven violence and knife crime. The VVU has made significant progress by using a multi-agency prevention approach, focussed on positive activities for young people, mentoring programmes and interventions. This is delivered in partnership with the police, councils, health and education partners, criminal justice agencies, faith groups, voluntary organisations, fire and rescue, and the community sector. The Violence and Vulnerability Unit has seen success and improvement, particularly in children and young adults, with the number of under 25 year olds admitted to hospital for assault with a sharp object reduced by 23% in 2022 compared to the year prior. The VVU has implemented a range of successful initiatives, including a community grants scheme, knife crime awareness campaign, a communications plan to share successes, the Fearless Futures project, sharing of learning, the ReRoute project, and the Listening Project, which provided a way to gain a user voice via young people. The Listening Project heard from 1,563 young people in Southend, Essex and Thurrock to understand how safe they felt in their communities. The VVU has been keen to establish evaluation and feedback of the work it has undertaken and to learn from best practice identified by the Home Office

for violence reduction units.

Communication and engagement have been instrumental to the VVU's work to deliver its priorities and seek change. The recent knife harm campaign was timed to coincide with the Knife Angel visiting the county, to stimulate conversation and amplify key messages of the campaign. Evaluation showed that 84% of parents who viewed the campaign felt it was effective at encouraging parents to speak to their children about knife crime, and 80% of parents would be more likely to talk to their children about this.

Prevention underpins the work of the VVU, with Fearless Futures and ReRoute being just two examples of its prevention programmes. Fearless Futures was developed with partners in academia and based on rigorous, independently evaluated research and insight. It relies on an algorithmic model built by Essex Police to identify and assist those individuals who are on the trajectory towards using a knife to commit serious violence. The ReRoute programme works with young people who have been arrested for possession of a knife but who are waiting to be charged. Work is undertaken with the individual to implement support and a positive intervention to prevent further offending.

The coordinated and strong approach of working with police and partners to tackle knife crime, gangs and drug driven violence has underpinned real change within this priority. While prevention can be hard to measure, the evaluation of projects and analysis of data of related offences show the impact this work has made and continues to be felt.

## **Conclusion**

Overall, the strategic approach set out in 2019 and developed in the 2021 Police and Crime Plan is showing positive results. A more robust approach at a national and a county level has been established to tackle those fuelling drug driven violence, exploiting the vulnerable and creating fear in our communities. However, to prevent drug driven violence, we need to continue with the public health approach set out and driven by our Violence and Vulnerability Partnership through the VVU. This is showing strong signs of working, with less people reporting to hospital with knife wounds, less people dying from drug related homicide and a fall in knife crime. However, this is still feared in our communities, and we must continue with this approach to fully realise the benefits. This is a ten-year programme, and we are five years in. Progress is being made but more is needed.

## **Reducing Violence Against Women and Girls (VAWG) and managing rape and serious sexual offences**

***“Our objective is to support a cultural change within society and provide strong, consistent, and vocal support for the safety of women and girls whether they report crimes against them or not”***

## **Introduction**

Tackling VAWG has been brought into stark focus in recent years, with national coverage around high profile cases and news stories outside of Essex impacting public confidence in policing nationally, and poor levels of positive outcomes recorded. The murder of Sarah Everard by a Metropolitan Police officer in 2021 caused significant damage to public confidence in the police and raised questions about failings that had been made by the Metropolitan Police Service. This devastating event acted as a catalyst for policing to commit to tackling VAWG, examining the link between women's safety and public trust in policing.

Although there have been positive movements made to reduce VAWG and better manage rape and sexual offences throughout the implementation of the 2021-24 Police and Crime Plan, more needs to be done. Without significant progress, it is challenging to address this difficult landscape. High profile reviews, such as that undertaken by Baroness Casey of the Metropolitan Police Service, highlight the failings that policing has made in relation to trust and confidence, particularly surrounding VAWG offences, and has uncovered cultural issues within policing nationally that cannot be ignored.

## **Activity and Progress**

Throughout the implementation of the Police and Crime Plan, work has been undertaken with police and partners to reduce VAWG. However, investigation of rape and sexual offences still sees more opportunity for development. Whilst Essex Police has not been one of the pilot forces for Operation Soteria, the force has implemented learning and guidance from Soteria to improve the investigation of rape and sexual assaults. The programme has a police-academic focus, with a strong research base to provide a framework to contribute to the development of a national operating model. The research has seen a victim-centred approach, support from Independent Sexual Violence Advisors (ISVAs), and strengthening of case files, with early advice from CPS being sought in order to increase conviction rates.

This has been further boosted by the additional ISVA and IDVA (Independent Domestic Violence Advisor) funding the PFCC has secured from the Ministry of Justice during the Police and Crime Plan period. The MoJ funding is part of its plan to deliver an extra 950 ISVAs and IDVAs nationally, and also supports commissioning of other support services for those impacted by domestic abuse and sexual violence. This has seen additional ISVAs and IDVAs introduced alongside specialists who support complex needs, specialist support for the LGBT+ community, and children and young person IDVAs. Funding has also been utilised to provide additional resource for counselling and therapeutic services to support male victims of sexual violence. The MoJ funding, supplemented with PFCC funding, has allowed investment in more counselling services, a boys and young men sexual abuse support worker, DA stalking helpline and advisor, children and young people recovery counselling, adult recovery programmes and counselling, a programmes practitioner, and an enhanced victim offer to support Essex Police's Domestic Abuse Problem Solving Teams. Combined with other funding avenues, this has resulted in 13 ISVAs and 15.5 IDVAs in Southend, Essex and Thurrock currently.



In the 12 months to March 2021, 36,168 violence against the person offences were recorded against females, including stalking and harassment offences. For the 12 months to December 2023, this has stood at 33,030 offences, an 8.7% reduction. However, the number of sexual offences against females has risen, with 3,723 recorded in the 12 months to March 2021, compared to 4,216 recorded in the 12 months to December 2023, a 13.2% increase. The solved rates for sexual offences have increased, albeit not at the level we would like to see, indicating more work needs to be achieved in this area. There were 274 solved sexual offences in the 12 months to March 2021, compared to 312 in the 12 months to December 2023 – a 13.9% increase.

Work has been undertaken within both the PFCC's office and the force to identify opportunities for learning from the Baroness Casey review of the Met and apply these to Essex Police to ensure recommendations are not missed. As such, a Professionalism, Trust and Confidence review was commissioned within the force to assess findings from the Casey report, provide opportunities for reflection, and understand the position of Essex Police, to identify areas of strength as well as those that require improvement. The outcomes have been reported back to the PFCC's office via the Performance and Resources Scrutiny Board, and to the Police, Fire and Crime Panel's Ethics and Integrity Sub-Committee, which has allowed the opportunity for oversight and discussion on findings and recommendations. While the overall findings were positive, there is still more to do, and we cannot become complacent in tackling VAWG.

In July 2023, the force carried out a deep dive on VAWG and rape and serious sexual offences. The deep dive showed that, in Essex, for the 12 months to June 2023, there was a total of 40,923 VAWG offences recorded. This is a reduction of 5,599 offences (12%) from the previous 12 months. 4,057 of the total number of crimes had been solved. This is a decrease of 2.94%. However, rape and other sexual offences have seen an increase in positive outcomes of 61.36% and 14.51% respectively. Good work undertaken by the force has increased the conversion from charge to conviction, with Essex Police being ranked top out of 43 forces across the UK for its 91.3% sexual offences conviction rate. While this shows that those cases going to court are being successfully prosecuted, it also indicates a significant shortfall in the number making it that far. This national problem is acute in Essex and was one of the areas addressed by the Government's End to End Rape Review in 2021 which led to the Operation Soteria pilots. While progress is being made, the step change required in this area has not yet been achieved.

Essex Police takes VAWG seriously, both externally and internally. There is a substantial amount of work ongoing in this area and continual improvements to working practice. Essex Police has gained assurance from an inspection by HMICFRS grading the force as "good" at vetting, IT monitoring and counter-corruption work in November 2022.

There has also been strong investment in Crime and Public Protection (C&PP) through the Police Uplift Programme from 2021-2023. This has seen an increase in both the Child Abuse Investigation Team's (CAIT's) and the Adult Sexual Abuse

Investigation Team's (ASAIT's) establishment. It has also seen the creation of a dedicated historical sexual offences team (QUEST), a Child Sexual Exploitation (CSE) Proactive Investigation Team to tackle complex and organised child sexual exploitation (CSE), and a Case Progression Team to investigate complex and protracted rape and serious sexual offences (RASSO) cases. Retention and recruitment remain challenging for C&PP, but this is a national issue and not one isolated to Essex.

The night-time economy and design of public spaces often affect women's feeling of safety, and a December 2022 survey found that only 41% of females state they feel safe walking alone after dark. Throughout the 2021-24 plan, the PFCC has supported initiatives such as the SOS Bus, Ask for Angela, Purple Flag and Best Bar None to help women feel safer in the night-time economy. Work has also been undertaken along with CSPs to help create safer public spaces, and use of the government's Safer Streets Fund as well as our own local PFCC Safer Streets Fund has helped to achieve this. Our local PFCC Safer Streets fund has helped target areas that have not yet accessed national Safer Streets grants. The fund has been allocated to make communities feel safer and is used to improve street lighting and CCTV, install safety measures and support awareness campaigns in key hotspots across Essex.

Partnership engagement has been essential in tackling VAWG, with collaborative working leading to the development of several projects such as the Essex County Council VAWG Charter, Project Minerva and the Essex County Council VAWG Mapping Programme. During 2022, as part of Project Minerva, Home Office funded work began to analyse Essex neighbourhoods, with Nottingham Trent University working with the PFCC's office, Essex Police, Essex County Council and the Essex County Fire and Rescue Service. The project has resulted in the development of detailed local maps showing every hotspot road in the county where women are at increased risk of violence. Minerva Zones have been shared with the Safer Essex Partnership and Community Safety Partnerships which are working with partners locally to put together bespoke plans to tackle the causes of violence against women and girls in those locations. The PFCC has provided funding for the Minerva zones with areas such as Basildon, Braintree, Brentwood and Rochford, Chelmsford, Colchester, Epping Forrest, Southend, Thurrock, and Uttlesford benefiting.

## **Conclusion**

Tackling VAWG and the management of rape and serious sexual offences remain areas for significant work, with more progress to be made. With the addition of VAWG to the Strategic Policing Requirement in 2023, it is unlikely that this will be an issue easily solved in the near future, and building an established change in the way we police rape and serious sexual offences and reduce VAWG is essential.