



## COMMISSIONER'S BLOG

### POLICE AND CRIME PANEL

1 September 2016

#### Introduction

I now write a regular blog on individual topics in which I have a specific interest. This new format replaces the previous diary blog which was a simple record of events I had attended. My blogs are published on my website ([www.wiltshire-pcc.gov.uk](http://www.wiltshire-pcc.gov.uk)) and the contents of them are copied below for the Panel's information.

## PROTECTING CHILDREN FROM BEING LABELLED CRIMINALS

14 July 2016

Last week I spent an evening at the Corn Exchange in Devizes with senior police officers and "stakeholders" (to use the jargon).

The guests were drawn from a wide range of public agencies and included teachers, social workers, probation workers, youth workers, councillors, magistrates and prosecutors.

It was one of a series of events which are the brainchild of Chief Constable Mike Veale. He believes strongly that close co-operation between Wiltshire Police and these various agencies is the only way that the needs of vulnerable people can be properly addressed.

It was a worthwhile event and I applaud Mr Veale for organising it, and the various guests for giving up an evening to ponder these issues. In this blog I would like to focus on one of the issues raised: vulnerable children.

One of Mr Veale's senior officers, Det Supt Craig Holden, spoke about the worrying problem of young people who go **missing** (anyone whose whereabouts cannot be established and where the circumstances are out of character, or the context suggests they may be at risk) or who are reported **absent** (not at a place where they are expected or required to be and with no apparent risk).

Det Supt Holden then set out some sobering statistics about children missing in the Wiltshire Police area (which covers Wiltshire and Swindon).

He said that, in 2015, 423 children were recording as missing. There had been a total of 897 incidents reported, and so some of these children had gone missing a number of times. In fact the top 20 most regularly missing children had – between them – gone missing 550 times.

Children who go missing regularly can appear on the surface to be "street wise". Some may commit offences and end up in court.

But beneath that "street wise" exterior you will often find a young person who is vulnerable, insecure and sometimes traumatised.

Wiltshire Police figures suggest there are currently 142 young people who are victims of child sexual exploitation (CSE) or at risk of being exploited.



As Commissioner I set the strategy for policing and community safety in Wiltshire and Swindon. One of the four priorities I have set out in my [Police and Crime Plan](#) is to protect the most vulnerable in society.

The Force has a talented and dedicated team of officers and staff who work closely with council partners to keep children safe from abuse.

The discussion in the Corn Exchange made me reflect on what can be done to try to protect children in care from becoming criminalised for minor offences. The concern is that, once they have a criminal record, their life chances will be blighted and they will run the risk of entering a downward spiral of criminality.

I was very interested to read a recent report by Lord Laming for the Prison Reform Trust which looked at the over-representation of children in care in the criminal justice system.

He found that half of the children in custody in England and Wales have, at some time, been in care.

His report, [In Care, Out of Trouble](#) describes how looked-after children are often prosecuted for challenging behaviour that would normally be dealt with by parents in a family home.

A recently retired magistrate told his inquiry she “often raised concerns about the way trivial incidents in children’s homes resulted in police call-outs and prosecutions in circumstances where ordinary parents would never resort to criminalising their own children”.

The report says low-level criminal behaviour should not be recorded as a crime but should instead lead to a referral to a welfare agency.

Lord Laming’s review highlights the need for children’s social services, youth offending teams, police and other criminal justice agencies to work closely together and to avoid court proceedings unless absolutely necessary.

Restorative justice could well have a part to play in keeping such children out of court.

As some readers may be aware, I have recently commissioned a new service called [Restorative Together](#) under which carefully-chosen volunteers are trained to bring victims of crime and offenders together, enabling everyone affected to repair the harm and find a positive way forward.

The scheme’s co-ordinator said she was recently invited into a school in the Wiltshire Police area to work with two nine-year-old pupils who had fallen out. With the help of one of her newly-trained facilitators a satisfactory outcome was reached.

I would like to think that this non-judgmental but nevertheless rigorous and challenging process could be put to good use in children’s homes when the circumstances do not, in all honesty, warrant calling out the police.

As a society we need to think about what we can do, as parents, grandparents, carers or public officials, to set our children on the right path as decent, law-abiding citizens.

Last month, the outgoing president of the Faculty of Public Health, Professor John Ashton, suggested that parents should receive lessons in how to bring up their children.

Mr Ashton was concerned about a minority of children leaving school in trouble emotionally or mentally and suffering from things like eating disorders, obesity, anxiety and stress.

Lessons in parenting skills could also help to improve discipline and communication.

Children, in my view, need to be able to go out and play in the way that my generation did. That is how we learned to explore the great outdoors and assess risks.

I believe that parents should encourage their children to join organisations such as Scouts, Guides and Brownies.

The **Volunteer Police Cadet** scheme is also a splendid way for boys and girls, aged 14 to 17, to contribute to society and achieve. There are cadet groups in Swindon, Chippenham and Trowbridge, and recruiting will open in September for a new group in Salisbury.

We all have a responsibility to bring up the next generation as decent, law-abiding citizens. Striving to keep vulnerable children from becoming criminalised for minor misdemeanours should be a priority.

## SOUP AND A SANDWICH FOR THE FOLK WHO'VE FALLEN THROUGH THE CRACKS

**8 August 2016**

For over ten years now I, along with other volunteers, have been organising a soup run for the homeless in Swindon, called the Filling Station. It operates on just one night a week from a car park in the centre of the town and does so without any statutory grants or funding.

I wanted to take this edition of my blog to tell you more about the charity and a cause which I am very passionate about.

One of the jobs I do for the Filling Station is to drive the van to the car park. Due to being required at many events as PCC, I can only commit to do this about once a month, but if I find myself with a free Thursday evening, I will often spend it here.



Picture Copyright by Vicky Scipio Swindon Advertiser

The service supports a number of people, some we see every week whilst others come along in times of hardship. The average number of clients in the last quarter was 48, with a high of 57 and a low back in March of 33. Overall the numbers are steady and not showing any decline or increase.



Each of the clients is offered soup and a hot or cold drink as well as a hot dog. In addition they are each given a bag of tinned food, typically soup, beans, stew and rice pudding. This is topped up with toiletries, like soap, loo roll and body spray. The van also has a supply of underwear and socks.

For a Thursday night there is a rota of four drivers, and then we are joined by between six and ten volunteers but we never know if there will be any.

Before Thursday night the van has to be packed. For that there are nine teams of two from Wroughton Church, who ensure that 60 bags of tins are made up, as well as a supply of hot dogs, drinks, mugs and clothes from our store.

We are lucky to work with Swindon-based homeless charity Threshold Housing Link, which from its hostel in Harding Street, prepares Thermos flasks of hot water and soup that we collect on the way to Carfax Street.

Over the years we have had various agencies attending the soup run. We are now joined by two outreach workers from Threshold who are there regularly, and we have occasional support from drug and alcohol workers from Change Grow Live (CGL). It is some time since we saw a mental health worker or indeed any of the nurses from the health centre that we park close to. The site was originally chosen because of its proximity to the Walk-in health centre but my understanding is that access is not as easy as it was and sadly, outreach has stopped.

The other group of supporters are the sandwich makers. In the main these come from churches in the town and there are over 15 groups on the rota. They undertake to supply about 100 rounds of individually packed sandwiches, some milk and fruit as well as any other edible treats such as cake or biscuits. I don't know how many people are in each group. But assuming there are ten that is over 150 people who are involved. Other groups visit and support from time to time. Nationwide Building Society has brought food for an evening and we occasionally get 30 ready meals from another group.

The clients who come and use the service turn up in a car park week after week for a free handout of food. But all our clients have multiple needs to be supported.

Mental health problems, drug or alcohol misuse can and do lead to homelessness. At the same time, being homeless can impact on people's mental wellbeing and can lead to drug and alcohol problems.

It may be a surprise to you that not all our clients are homeless. But they are in a cycle which includes homelessness. Interestingly a large number of the clients are known to the probation service or the Community Rehabilitation Company (CRC). I did a survey last year at which point there were just under 40 people known to be rough sleeping in Swindon. Of that group ten were CRC cases and two were in the care of probation. Yet here they were without shelter.

In my first term as Commissioner I made a grant to ensure that those released from prison were met "at the gate" and their accommodation sorted out. That became a duty of probation and the CRC, but, with over 30 per cent of those homeless on the streets in their care, it seems to be an issue that needs focus and challenge again.

Homelessness is not just a Swindon thing, it is happening across the whole of our county, but you might say it is more visible in Swindon. There has been an issue with the homeless in Devizes camped to the rear of the Police Headquarters, and I know that Wiltshire Councillor Jonathon Seed has been looking at the problems in Salisbury. In Trowbridge, one of the mayor charities is Breakthrough Trowbridge, a charity which not only those who are already homeless, but also those who are faced with the prospect of being homeless.



During my most recent evening at the Filling Station I had to call the police. It is always difficult to know what to do for the best. There were 60 clients and ten volunteers in an open car park when two of the clients started having “words”. The client group are very practised at defusing such matters by splitting the parties up, which happened in this instance. But as the person in charge for the evening I have to think about the safety of both the clients and volunteers, so I called 101 to see if the police could direct a unit to maintain the peace. I am aware that sometimes those fuelled by drugs or alcohol are a match for even the youngest and fittest volunteer! The two combatants came back together and were heading to the dual carriageway. After a few punches were slung they parted. It was all over as fast as it started and they were back to being the best of mates again.

When the patrol arrived all was peaceful and I felt a bit of a fraud for making the call. To make matters worse, some needles had been pointed out to me earlier, so I asked the officers if they had a “sharps” box. We returned to clear up, only to find the needles had gone, probably tidied away, I know not where, by the clients themselves.

On the wall in my office I have a printout of Maslow’s hierarchy of needs. It is the basis on which we can all build our lives which includes having food, water and shelter. It sounds so simple, but the time I spend at the Filling Station shows me what can happen when one of these elements is removed.