



COMMISSIONER'S BLOG

POLICE AND CRIME PANEL

1 December 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) and the contents of them are copied below for the Panel's information.

THE HIDDEN RISKS OF THE BENEFIT CAP

7 November 2016

If you've ever watched "Can't pay? We'll take It away!" on Channel 5 you'll have seen what can happen to people in debt who can't settle their bills. Whilst the documentary series has featured some rogues who never intended to repay a loan, it has also highlighted the desperation and tears of decent folk who open the door to find bailiffs waiting with a writ. In some cases, possessions will end up being confiscated. In others the house or flat will be repossessed by order of the court ... and the occupants locked outside.

Charities such as Citizens Advice are very concerned that benefit changes which took effect on Monday (7 November) could lead to more families facing eviction because they have been unable to pay the rent. You may be wondering at this point why that should concern your Police and Crime Commissioner. Well, I'll give you a clue: I was attending a meeting of the Wiltshire Domestic Abuse Forum where a presentation about the benefits shake-up was given by Sarah Cardy of Wiltshire Citizens Advice and the Chair of Wiltshire Money.

The benefit cap sets a limit on the total amount of certain benefits working-age people can claim, if in receipt of housing benefit or universal credit. As of this week, the maximum that a couple or a single parent can receive in benefits is £384 a week or £20,000 a year outside London. The current cap is £500 a week for single parents and couples, or £26,000 a year outside London.

Sarah explained that, if a household's total benefits exceed the new cap, it will be the housing benefit entitlement that will be cut. And that could put people straight into arrears with their rent - and on a slippery slope to eviction.

The concern is that the impact of the cap will be felt most dramatically by those already most at risk of becoming homeless. According to the pressure group, Gingerbread, more than 43,000 single parents nationally with a child under five could be hit by the cap.

You might be saying to yourself: "Where does the domestic abuse come in?" Well, by rolling a number of benefits together and introducing Universal Credit, the Department for Work and Pensions is moving away from benefits being paid to particular members of the family. If in future benefits are paid to a partner who controls the relationship through coercion, then there is the risk of clashes over how that reduced income is spent.

If the family breaks up, we could envisage cases where children are living in unsatisfactory temporary accommodation and adults could find themselves living rough. That could lead to drug or alcohol problems which in turn can lead to crime. I have first-hand knowledge of this dismal chain of events through my voluntary work with the Filling Station, which provides

soup and support to homeless people in Swindon. In addition we could even see some women seeking to make up for the shortfall by becoming sex workers.

I am not saying that capping benefits is necessarily wrong. What concerns me is that the consequences of this massive change do not seem to have been fully anticipated and planned for by some of the agencies which support families and individuals. And that could have an impact on our local communities, and on public services, not least our police.

HOLDING THE LINE IN THE FACE OF RIOTERS ON THE RAMPAGE

9 November 2016



Exercise Conquer pictures courtesy of Devon and Cornwall Police



I think we can all agree that policing is a difficult business. Police officers, among other things, are required to keep the peace. Fortunately the vast majority of people in the area served by Wiltshire Police are law-abiding folk who go about their business in a peaceable way. The same goes for the rest of Britain.

It's the shared sense among the public of what is the right thing to do that enables our bobbies to police by consent, just as Sir Robert Peel envisaged when he set up the Metropolitan Police Service in London in 1829.

But what happens when a small element in our society chooses not to keep the peace. I'm not talking here about music belting out too loudly at a gathering (annoying though that can be). I have in mind the serious disorder that can - and occasionally does - break out on the streets of some of our cities.

Cast your mind back to August 2011. Trouble broke out in Tottenham in north London after Mark Duggan was shot dead by police. They were attempting to carry out an arrest as part of an operation to counter gun crime in the African and Caribbean communities. An initially peaceful protest turned violent and, over the coming days, serious disorder broke out in various parts of the capital, spreading to Bristol, Birmingham, Manchester and Liverpool. Widespread looting was reported and buildings were set alight.

Wiltshire Police, in common with forces across the country, has to be ready to supply so-called police support units (PSUs) within strict time limits under what's known as the national policing requirement. The Force trains its officers for such eventualities.

I had a chance the other day to observe public order training on a far larger scale, involving the five South West forces plus fire and ambulance colleagues under the name Exercise Conquer. It took place over two weeks in a fake village used by the Army for training on Salisbury Plain.

It might have been an exercise, but I can tell you it looked very real and quite hairy from my vantage point. Officers from Wiltshire and the rest of the region came face to face with so-called "violent persons" clutching baseball bats. They were not holding back: the police shields were repeatedly struck by the "rioters" and fire bombs exploded at their feet with broken glass showering the ground. The "rioters" kept up a barrage of noise.

I saw good evidence of officers from across the five Forces working together and putting common procedures into practice. Despite the violence, the flames and the provocation, they held the line impressively when lesser mortals might have been tempted to back away.

The thing to bear in mind is that there may be occasions when the police are called to hold the line between two opposing factions, or to allow a particular group to exercise their right to protest peacefully when others are trying to scare them off.

Police officers bearing shields and wearing helmets with visors may not look like the friendly bobby in your community. But we should remember that they are there, in the front line, protecting life and property and, yes, keeping the peace.