



House of Commons
Home Affairs Committee

Home Office preparedness for COVID-19 (Coronavirus): Policing

First Report of Session 2019–21

*Report, together with formal minutes relating
to the report*

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Home Affairs Committee

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The current staff of the Committee are Simon Armitage (Committee Specialist), Melissa Bailey (Committee Assistant), Chloe Cockett (Senior Specialist), Elizabeth Hunt (Clerk), Penny McLean (Committee Specialist), George Perry (Senior Media and Communications Officer), Paul Simpkin (Senior Committee Assistant) and Dominic Stockbridge (Assistant Clerk).

Contacts

All correspondence should be addressed to the Clerk of the Home Affairs Committee, House of Commons, London SW1A 0AA. The telephone number for general enquiries is 020 7219 6856; the Committee's email address is homeaffcom@parliament.uk.

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About this report

1. We launched an inquiry into Home Office preparedness for COVID-19 (Coronavirus) on 12 March 2020. We have since conducted two oral evidence sessions on the policing response to the crisis at national and force level. We have heard evidence from the National Police Chiefs' Council (NPCC), the National Police Coordination Centre (NPoCC), the Police Federation of England and Wales (the Police Federation), the Police Superintendents' Association, and the Chief Constables of Bedfordshire Police, Derbyshire Constabulary, North Yorkshire Police and West Yorkshire Police.

2. This short report summarises our findings from those sessions and makes recommendations to the Home Office and police to ensure that police forces have the right support they need to continue their vital work. We will publish further short reports on different aspects of the response to COVID-19 in due course. We thank the organisations and witnesses who have so far provided us with evidence during such a busy and pressured time.

3. The COVID-19 pandemic is an unprecedented situation that poses an urgent threat to public health and safety, and has put the police in the position of dealing with challenges they have never faced before, which they are having to navigate with sensitivity and diligence. We thank the police for the vital work they are doing to counter the spread of the pandemic while continuing to protect our communities from crime and safeguard the most vulnerable in society. They will continue to have our strong support in their work to protect the NHS and save lives.

Enforcement of the new Coronavirus restrictions

4. COVID-19 poses an urgent threat to life, to public health and to the safety of communities in the UK. It is therefore inevitable that the police service is playing a key part in the national response.

5. Regulations designed to slow the spread of COVID-19 came into force in England, Wales and Scotland on Thursday 26 March and in Northern Ireland on Saturday 28 March. These regulations gave the police unprecedented powers to enforce restrictions on our daily lives in order to protect the NHS and save lives. They have the support of Parliament and the public.¹ Police officers, special constables, community support officers and others designated in the regulations are provided with a range of enforcement powers over those who leave home without a "reasonable excuse", including powers to issue fines.²

6. Since the Prime Minister first announced measures to restrict movement and gatherings on 23 March, the police have encouraged the public to leave home only for the following four purposes advised by the Government in its social distancing guidance:

- shopping for basic necessities, for example food and medicine, which must be as infrequent as possible;

1 Polling undertaken on behalf of Crest Advisory by YouGov found that 42% of adults "fully support" the current policing approach and a further 32% "support the approach but in some cases they are going too far". For a summary, see: Crest Advisory, [Policing the COVID-19 lockdown - what the public thinks](#), 8 April 2020; for full polling data, see: https://docs.cdn.yougov.com/7jr26rsm5q/Crest_CoronaPolicing_200405.pdf

2 [The Health Protection \(Coronavirus, Restrictions\) \(England\) Regulations 2020](#); [The Health Protection \(Coronavirus\) \(Restrictions\) \(Scotland\) Regulations 2020](#); [The Health Protection \(Coronavirus Restrictions\) \(Wales\) Regulations 2020](#); [The Health Protection \(Coronavirus, Restrictions\) Regulations \(Northern Ireland\) 2020](#)

- one form of exercise a day, for example a run, walk, or cycle—alone or with members of your household;
- any medical need, including to donate blood, avoid or escape risk of injury or harm, or to provide care or to help a vulnerable person;
- travelling for work purposes, but only where you cannot work from home.³

7. However, the list of “reasonable excuses” for leaving home provided for in law is more extensive and is non-exhaustive. This led to concerns that police were enforcing Government advice rather than the letter of the law.⁴ Examples included the arrest and conviction of an individual using powers in the Coronavirus Act 2020 which were later found inapplicable in that case, and one force reporting that it had reprimanded individuals for shopping for non-essential foods, despite there being no definition in law of which foods are and are not essential.⁵ Over the first weekend that the new laws were in place, 27–29 March, some forces issued over 100 enforcement notices and others issued none, raising questions about how consistently the law was being applied.⁶

8. On 31 March, a policing brief ‘in response to Coronavirus Government Legislation’ was published by the NPCC and College of Policing, providing guidance on policing the new powers provided in public health regulations in England; guidance relating to powers in the Coronavirus Act 2020 was published on 3 April.⁷ The 31 March guidance states that enforcement should always be a last resort, following engagement, explanation and encouragement to the public to comply with the law. There have been efforts to provide training for officers at a pace and on a scale “never before experienced”.⁸ On 11 April, the Home Secretary told media that “the majority of police officers around the country are following the guidance really well”.⁹

9. Some police tactics during the beginning of the lockdown have drawn criticism, including use of drone footage, stopping vehicles and closing parks. We raised these criticisms with Chief Constables. Chief Constables were keen to highlight that the majority of the public were complying with the new laws and with Government advice. They told us that their strategy was first to “engage, explain and encourage” in order to promote compliance, and only as a last resort to enforce the regulations.¹⁰

10. In the Easter week, beginning 6 April, the police joined the Government in urging people to “stay at home this Easter to protect the NHS and save lives”.¹¹

3 Cabinet Office, [Coronavirus outbreak FAQs: what you can and can't do](#), 29 March 2020

4 The Guardian, [Covid-19: ex-supreme court judge lambasts 'disgraceful' policing](#), 30 March 2020; Institute for Government, [The government must draw a clear line between law and guidance during the coronavirus crisis](#), 1 April 2020; David Allen Green, [What the police are getting wrong about the coronavirus regulations](#), 31 March 2020

5 The Independent, [Coronavirus: Woman fined £660 for refusing to tell police reasons for travel to have wrongful conviction quashed](#), 3 April 2020; <https://twitter.com/PoliceWarr/status/1244163251799195649>

6 The Guardian, [UK police warned against 'overreach' in use of virus lockdown powers](#), 31 March 2020

7 College of Policing, [COVID-19: Policing brief in response to Coronavirus Government Legislation](#), 31 March 2020; College of Policing, [Coronavirus Act 2020 \(The Act\)](#), 3 April 2020

8 Q122 [CSupt Paul Griffiths]

9 The Times, [Police issue more than 1,000 fines to people flouting coronavirus lockdown rules](#), 11 April 2020

10 Q149 [CC Peter Goodman]

11 10 Downing Street, [Coronavirus: Government launches campaign urging people to stay at home this Easter](#), 9 April 2020

11. Over the course of that week and across the Easter weekend, there were several further media reports of the regulations being wrongly applied. On 9 April, Northamptonshire Police clarified on Twitter that “we absolutely will NOT be searching people’s shopping trolleys in Northamptonshire” after a press briefing by the Chief Constable implied that they might in future if warnings were not heeded.¹²

12. On 10 April, Cambridgeshire Police, in a tweet that was subsequently deleted, described visiting a supermarket where it was “Good to see everyone was abiding by social distancing measures and the non essential [sic] aisles were empty”.¹³ The force later clarified that “the force position, in line with national guidance, is that we are not monitoring what people are buying from supermarkets.”¹⁴ The Prime Minister’s spokesperson also clarified that “We set out a list of shops which could remain open and if the shops are on that list then they are free to sell whatever they have in stock.”¹⁵

13. On 12 April, Greater Manchester Police apologised after a man who told a police officer he was running errands for a vulnerable family member was handcuffed and arrested for “breaking COVID guidelines”. He was “de-arrested” and given a fixed penalty notice.¹⁶

14. The previous day, 11 April, Martin Hewitt, Chair of the NPCC, stated at a Downing Street press conference that, as of 8 April, 1,084 notices had been issued across 37 forces, indicating that “full data on enforcement so far” would be published in the coming week.¹⁷ He also emphasised that the “vast majority of the public [were] abiding by the rules and acting responsibly”.¹⁸

15. CC John Robins of West Yorkshire Police told us that his force had recorded 1,200 interactions with the public about the regulations, and had implemented 20 fines in cases where “people were deliberately breaching the regulations, and were often associated with other criminality”.¹⁹ CC Peter Goodman, Derbyshire Constabulary, told us 30 fixed penalty notices had been issued. CC Garry Forsyth, Bedfordshire Police, told us that, prior to giving evidence, the force had issued only one fine, while CC Lisa Winward, North Yorkshire Police said 11 fines had been issued since 2 April “in cases where it has been blatant disregard for what we are trying to achieve in preventing the spread of the virus”.²⁰ These figures suggested to us that the application of sanctions in those counties had been modest, and viewed alongside the national total of 1,084 sanctions issued as of 8 April, indicated that the overall police response had been proportionate.²¹

16. Chief Superintendent Paul Griffiths emphasised the importance of public consent in promoting adherence to the regulations:

We police by consent; the relationship with the public is important to us, and we have the vast majority of the public working with us and understanding

12 <https://twitter.com/NorthantsPolice/status/1248238009360793601>

13 Sky News, [Coronavirus: Cambridge Police checks no one is in non-essential aisles at supermarket](#), 10 April 2020

14 Sky News, [Coronavirus: Cambridge Police checks no one is in non-essential aisles at supermarket](#), 10 April 2020

15 BBC News, [Coronavirus: Public reassured over lockdown policing rules](#), 10 April 2020

16 Sky News, [Coronavirus: Police apologies after man ‘arrested for running errands’](#), 12 April 2020

17 National Police Chiefs’ Council, [Daily UK Government COVID-19 briefing: Speech from the Chair of the NPCC, Martin Hewitt](#), 11 April 2020

18 The Times, [Police issue more than 1,000 fines to people flouting coronavirus lockdown rules](#), 11 April 2020

19 Q148 [CC John Robins]

20 Q149 [CC Lisa Winward]

21 National Police Chiefs’ Council, [Daily UK Government COVID-19 briefing: Speech from the Chair of the NPCC, Martin Hewitt](#), 11 April 2020

the principles of what we are trying to achieve. We recognise the powers that we have been given, but our strategy remains strong, in terms of trying to engage and explain the situation before we have to turn, as a last resort, to enforcement.²²

17. On the question of compliance with guidance in parks and green spaces, CC John Robins, West Yorkshire Police, told us he recognised that, especially for “people who do not have access to a garden or even a yard”, there was a need to allow people to “get out”, but was satisfied that “while some of the parks are closed, there are sufficient places for people to exercise for their health and wellbeing”.²³ However, he told us that he did not believe the force had increased enforcement in parks before councils closed them.²⁴

18. CC Lisa Winward told us that North Yorkshire Police had set up “vehicle engagement points” which had been misinterpreted in media reports as roadblocks, “a much more enforcement-style of tactic”. CC Peter Goodman told us that publication of drone footage by Derbyshire Constabulary had effectively disseminated the police’s key message to avoid crowded beauty spots, telling the Committee that “it was a bit controversial, but it created a conversation.”²⁵

19. The vast majority of the public are following Government advice and complying with the new Regulations, and the police are adapting quickly and effectively to challenges in upholding the new law. Adherence to the regulations is principally the responsibility of the public across the country, and we agree that police measures to restrict movement and gatherings will only succeed if the principle of policing by consent is upheld. We welcome the strategy to engage, explain and encourage before considering enforcement, and the determination on the part of the police to uphold the tradition of policing by consent.

20. Given the pace at which the new regulations had to be implemented, it is not surprising that there have been some early problems and errors and we welcome the additional guidance that the police have published because it is important that these do not endure.

21. We welcome the swift clarifications and apologies from forces on social media about cases where the police have got things wrong. Forces need to ensure that there are proper checks in place to ensure errors that are not captured on social media are also corrected. The early evidence and figures shared with us from some forces suggest that the overall police response has been proportionate. Some of the challenges for the police have arisen due to the divergence between the regulations and the different statements from Government. *The Department for Health and Social Care and the Home Office need to ensure that where there is divergence between regulations and messages coming from central Government (for example over shopping for non-essential goods) they continue to provide swift clarity for the public as well as the police; otherwise the police will be left in a difficult position.*

22. It is vital that all forces and all officers understand the distinction between Government advice and legal requirement, and that the tone and tactics they use are

22 Q111 [CSupt Paul Griffiths]

23 Q151 [CC John Robins]

24 Q157 [CC John Robins]

25 Q166 [CC Peter Goodman, CC Lisa Winward]

appropriate to each. Failing to do so depletes public trust. We will continue to monitor the actions of forces to ensure that a bond of trust is maintained between the police and the public.

23. We recommend that the NPCC and the College of Policing collate and publish figures for use of new enforcement measures by all UK forces on a weekly basis and monitor where there is significant divergence between forces in the use of enforcement measures. The NPCC and the College of Policing should review their guidance at least monthly, and inform the Committee in writing of any changes they plan to make.

24. Parks and green spaces provide benefits to the health and wellbeing of all members of the public and especially those who do not have access to outdoor space where they live. For families with children and many others, being prevented from using local parks can make it much harder to cope with lockdown. Where people are deliberately flouting the social distancing regulations when using parks, they are making it much harder for others who are adhering to the rules. In those circumstances, intervention by the police is very important. In some cases, local authorities and the police had taken the decision to close parks without having first tried enforcement measures or alternative access arrangements. Especially in urban areas where there are few alternative green spaces, we urge police forces and local authorities to work in partnership, and first consider whether proper enforcement action against those who are breaching the rules would allow parks and green spaces to be kept open for everyone else instead.

The nature of crime and police demand during lockdown

25. When asked whether certain types of incident had reduced as a result of the pandemic, such as road traffic accidents and domestic burglaries, Chief Superintendent Paul Griffiths told us that “demand is changing somewhat”.²⁶ There had been a drop in calls, crime and incidents, and arrest rates. Resulting capacity was being redirected to enforce the law around social distancing.²⁷ However, while overall capacity within the police service remained reduced in many cases owing to COVID-19 related absence, in some cases police reported greater officer capacity at the frontline.

26. While the NPCC has reported a 21% drop in overall crime during the lockdown compared to the same four weeks in 2019, the present circumstances increase the possibility for certain crimes to occur, including online fraud and domestic abuse.²⁸ Campaigners have warned that restrictions keeping people at home could result in a “domestic abuse pandemic” as vulnerable people are forced to spend time in proximity to their abusers.²⁹ One campaign group has reported a 150% increase in visits to UK-wide national domestic abuse websites since movement restrictions were implemented.³⁰ Thames Valley Police

26 Q142 [CSupt Paul Griffiths]

27 Q142 [CSupt Paul Griffiths]

28 National Police Chiefs’ Council, [Daily UK Government COVID-19 briefing: Speech from the Chair of the NPCC, Martin Hewitt](#), 11 April 2020

29 BBC News, ‘Coronavirus: [‘Domestic abuse pandemic likely due to shutdown’](#)’, 30 March 2020

30 Refuge, [25% increase in calls to National Domestic Abuse Helpline since lockdown measures began](#), 6 April 2020

and Avon and Somerset Police have both reported increases in domestic abuse calls. Conversely, the Chief Constable of Gwent Police said she feared victims were “suffering in silence” after a drop in calls to the force.³¹

27. In oral evidence, Chief Constables reiterated that combating domestic abuse remained a priority. Forces had briefed officers on the need to be “professionally curious as to why some people might not be indoors”.³² At the 11 April briefing, Martin Hewitt appealed directly to victims, saying “we will come when you call for help” and that lockdown was not a time when offenders would get away with perpetrating abuse.³³ We note that “to escape a risk of harm” is a legal “reasonable excuse” for leaving the home.³⁴

28. Scrutinising how police and Government safeguard against any increased domestic abuse risk is a priority for the Committee. It is worrying that charities and police forces are reporting an increase in calls as victims face periods of confinement with their abusers. We have therefore issued a further call for evidence on these concerns, with a view to producing a further short, specific report. We encourage anybody with concerns about the wellbeing of themselves or others to contact the services listed in that call for evidence.³⁵ Individuals at risk of immediate violence or abuse should always call 999 and take steps to protect themselves or their families from violence, including if necessary leaving the home and seeking refuge and support.

29. Police told the Committee that they were working hard to reduce any increased possibility of child sexual abuse during the crisis, both as a result of lockdown, and also from children spending more time on mobile devices which could expose them to a higher risk of online grooming.³⁶ We will address the response to child abuse and exploitation alongside our further work on domestic abuse.

30. Forces are also “having to adapt and change the ways in which [they] are policing” to protect against online fraud and cyber-crime, particularly targeting vulnerable people.³⁷ It is repellent to see would-be fraudsters pose as legitimate sources of information about COVID-19 in order to reach victims.

31. We encourage the public to remain vigilant, and to stop and think twice before giving any money or personal details away over the phone or in person.

32. Previous Home Affairs Committee reports have set out strong concerns about the weaknesses and inadequacies of Action Fraud and policing arrangements to tackle online crime and fraud.³⁸ Rising online fraud as a result of COVID-19 is likely to

31 Daily Mail, [‘Priti Patel pledges to help vulnerable people stuck at home with domestic abusers during the lockdown after police chief reveals online child abuse has increased during the coronavirus crisis’](#), 28 March 2020; The Guardian, [‘Warning over rise in UK domestic abuse cases linked to coronavirus’](#), 26 March 2020; BBC News, [‘Coronavirus: ‘Domestic abuse pandemic likely due to shutdown’](#), 30 March 2020

32 Q176 [CC Garry Forsyth]

33 National Police Chiefs’ Council, [Daily UK Government COVID-19 briefing: Speech from the Chair of the NPCC, Martin Hewitt](#), 11 April 2020

34 The Health Protection (Coronavirus, Restrictions) (England) Regulations 2020, [Regulation 6](#); The Health Protection (Coronavirus) (Restrictions) (Scotland) Regulations 2020, [Regulation 8](#); The Health Protection (Coronavirus Restrictions) (Wales) Regulations 2020, [Regulation 8](#); The Health Protection (Coronavirus, Restrictions) Regulations (Northern Ireland) 2020, [Regulation 5](#)

35 Home Affairs Committee, [Further call for evidence on domestic abuse in Coronavirus inquiry](#), 6 April 2020

36 Q179 [CC Peter Goodman], Q181 [CC John Robins]; Q111 [CSupt Paul Griffiths]; Q133 [PS Simon Kempton]

37 Q147 [CC John Robins]

38 For example, see Home Affairs Committee, Tenth Report of Session 2017–19, [Policing for the future](#) (HC (2017–19) 515), pp. 23–24

expose those weaknesses further. We urge the Home Office, National Crime Agency and NPCC to set out what action they are taking to address COVID-19 related online fraud in the short term. We believe it is imperative that the Home Office takes seriously the Committee's previous recommendations and overhauls and modernises action against online fraud as we emerge from this crisis.

33. The previous Home Affairs Committee found that the police were increasingly acting as first responders for people living with mental illness.³⁹ Chief Superintendent Paul Griffiths said that data on mental health incidents was still forthcoming, but police were alert to the risk that mental health issues could increase. There have been reports of the police increasingly having to attend deaths at home from COVID-19, with one report describing the pressure faced by a police officer who had responded to 15 deaths in the space of 24 hours.⁴⁰ PS Simon Kempton told us that there were “very early indications of an increase in suicide attempts and suicides. It is far too early to say that there is a real trend, but there are very early indications of that.”⁴¹ CC John Robins said that forces “have all the structures in place” to support those with mental illnesses as well to support officers whose own mental health could be affected by the pressures of responding to the crisis.⁴²

34. We welcome the commitment from forces to support mental health. It is important that police officers get the support they need both to respond to mental health cases and look after their own mental health during this crisis. Police forces must have the resources to be able adequately to support officers who have had to deal with traumatic incidents, including the aftermath of suicide, and attending deaths suspected as resulting from COVID-19.

35. Chief constables have no legal powers to ensure the police service can make greater use of its volunteer officers (special constables) in times of national emergency. This contrasts with the armed forces and, since the Coronavirus Act 2020 came into force, Health and Social Care services. The Committee recognises the importance of preserving the special voluntary relationship between special constables and their forces. CC Lisa Winward told us that it was a “very special relationship” and “we want to maintain that very special element of volunteering in policing”. However, she added that “a look at the legislation in times of crisis would absolutely be welcomed.” **The Committee believes that, in times of national emergency only, chief constables should not have to rely on the goodwill of employers alone to make increased use of their trained special constables, should they need to do so. The Committee therefore recommends that the Home Office immediately addresses the discrepancy in Schedule 7 of the Coronavirus Act 2020, which does not list special constables amongst the types of volunteers employers are compelled to release on full paid leave should they be needed to report for duty by their chief constable.**

39 Home Affairs Committee, Tenth Report of Session 2017–19, [Policing for the future](#) (HC (2017–19) 515), pp. 46–51

40 The Independent, [Coronavirus: Police trauma warning after one officer called to 15 COVID-related deaths in 24 hours](#), 11 April 2020

41 Q138 [PS Simon Kempton]

42 Q136 [CSupt Paul Griffiths]; Q182 [CC John Robins]

Relationship with the criminal justice system

36. CC John Robins told us that workers in the wider criminal justice sector had not been designated as key workers. As a result, “we have all seen that magistrates courts are no longer sitting”.⁴³ He warned that, after restrictions had been lifted, there was unlikely to be a “return to normality” for the criminal justice processes while a backlog remained:

With each week and month that goes by, with those other agencies not working in the way they did before, I am really concerned for victims and witnesses, and about attrition, the backlog and the care and welfare of those people who have been subject to crime. I would like to see more done in relation to wider criminal justice over the next few weeks, to try to see what we can get back on track.⁴⁴

He concluded that “it is a shame that the wider criminal justice system has slowed right down at the very time we need to keep on top of it”.⁴⁵

37. Effective law enforcement is a multipartite process. The courts have a crucial role to play in ensuring that crimes committed during the pandemic are dealt with in an appropriate time frame and a professional manner. It is therefore concerning that workers supporting the criminal justice system have not been afforded key worker status. We recommend that Government review which workers in the criminal justice system have not been afforded key worker status, and consider extending the status to them. They should write to us to inform us of the outcome, and explain the rationale for any decision not to extend the status to workers in the system.

Provision of COVID-19 tests to police officers

38. We recognise that providing tests to NHS workers must be the Government’s first priority. Witnesses agreed.⁴⁶ However, ensuring provision of antigen tests to police officers as soon as possible will enable the police better to plan their resources and possibly reduce absence.⁴⁷ The Police Superintendents’ Association told us that, at the time of our meeting on 6 April, the national police absence rate was approximately 13%.⁴⁸ However, that average represented a very wide range of differences with the highest at 27% and the lowest under 6%. No explanation was given for those differences. Police abstraction rates include normal absence rates—which again vary between forces—although none of the witnesses suggested that it had so far been necessary to call on the volunteers, mostly former police officers, who had been invited to sign up near the beginning of the COVID-19 outbreak.⁴⁹ They had also reconfigured training courses to release cadets in training to frontline duties complementary to policing COVID-19. The Police Federation told us that there was “a huge amount of staff at the minute who are unable to work because they are in self-isolation”; the NPCC agreed that police were “losing staff who may [...] not necessarily need to be locked down”.⁵⁰ Testing officers to determine who

43 Q189 [CC John Robins]

44 Q189 [CC John Robins]

45 Q189 [CC John Robins]

46 Q25 [DCC Paul Netherton], Q112 [CSupt Paul Griffiths], Q194 [CC Garry Forsyth]

47 Q111 [CSupt Paul Griffiths]

48 Q142 [CSupt Paul Griffiths]

49 Qq186–8 [CC Garry Forsyth, CC Peter Goodman, CC John Robins]

50 Q110 [PS Simon Kempton], Q29 [DCC Paul Netherton]

is and is not infectious would therefore have a direct beneficial effect on the availability of frontline officers. More officer availability would reduce the difficult reprioritisation decisions senior officers might have to make, and ease the immense burden on all officers. We were interested to hear in our evidence session on 6 April that the police had been informed that they might have testing available “in the next two to three weeks”.⁵¹ The Home Office and the Department for Health and Social Care have not yet provided public confirmation that the police will get access to tests as part of the target to scale up capacity to 100,000 tests a day by the end of April, nor on when precisely tests for the police will be available.⁵² We have heard that tests which some forces had purchased have been deemed unreliable, and would expect this to delay the roll-out of testing.

39. We support the Government’s decision to prioritise NHS and social care staff for COVID-19 antigen testing. Once testing capacity has been suitably scaled up, however, police officers must be an early priority. This will increase the availability of officers, and therefore the amount of support they are able to provide to the public. The Home Office should write to us to clarify the plans and timetable for the testing regime to be put in place for police officers. The letter should tell us: when tests will start becoming available to officers; whether the Government’s 100,000 target by the end of April includes any tests for police officers; how it will ensure that police are being given accurate information about tests; and if certain police roles or forces will be prioritised for testing, and the reasons why. The Home Office should also explain if police forces will be required to purchase their own tests or if tests will be provided to them from central government once they become available.

Personal Protective Equipment

40. The NPCC has worked with Public Health England to produce guidance for officers about appropriate use of personal protective equipment (PPE).⁵³ However, the Police Federation told us that “there has been some confusion with different advice from Public Health England and the Health and Safety Executive” which “might have fed confusion” about PPE guidance issued to officers.⁵⁴ One chief constable recognised that interpreting new guidance from “various different places” was a challenge.⁵⁵ The Committee has seen three different versions of PPE guidance for police officers, the main point of difference between them being guidance about the use of face masks and disposable gloves in situations where officers are in contact with colleagues and suppliers but social distancing is not achievable—for example, in a police car.

41. Since giving evidence to us, the Police Federation has expressed public concern about inconsistent PPE guidance. The Chair of the Police Federation, John Apter, said:

This constantly changing advice, a lack of guidance and mixed messages from Public Health England, the NPCC and the Health and Safety Executive is dangerous and completely unacceptable. This is not a training exercise;

51 Q195 [CC Peter Goodman]

52 Q195 [CC Peter Goodman]

53 Q33 [DCC Paul Netherton]

54 Q119 [PS Simon Kempton]

55 Q169 [CC Garry Forsyth]

this is reality and is a matter of life or death. We must ensure officers have clear coherent advice and the best protective equipment available to do their job.⁵⁶

42. Summary PPE Utilisation guidance which was developed by the NPCC and Public Health England was first issued to all forces on 3rd April. It stated that officers should wear fluid resistant surgical masks (IIR) when in contact with police colleagues and suppliers and where social distancing was not available, and should risk assess whether there was a need for disposable gloves. This advice was reissued two days later on 5 April, stating that masks were only required if no other control measures were available. The guidance was then issued for a third time on 8 April stating that masks and gloves should not be worn. Guidance was also changed for other scenarios across the three sets of documents. This has inevitably caused concern for frontline officers.

43. The Federation proceeded to issue its own advice about PPE usage “in the absence of a coherent explanation as to why these changes were made”.⁵⁷ This advises officers to wear a fluid resistant surgical mask when working in close proximity (within two metres) to colleagues and members of the public. In a statement on 9 April NPCC Lead for Wellbeing, CC Andy Rhodes, said:

The safety of our staff and officers is the number one priority of every chief constable [...] In an incredibly fast-moving situation, we are working closely with government and experts to make sure we have accurate up to date advice reflecting the unique circumstances our officers and staff work in.⁵⁸

44. All four chief constables told us that every patrol car in their forces had been issued with PPE, but concerns remained about supply chain sustainability and its impact on medium to long term PPE provision.⁵⁹ Simon Kempton also gave an indication of the risks that continued to arise in relation to PPE:

I was on an arrest inquiry about somebody who is known to be violent, and is suspected of having COVID-19, and my colleague and I did not have the PPE when we went to make that arrest inquiry.⁶⁰

45. The NPCC’s civil contingencies lead told us that PPE levels in forces were being monitored “on a daily basis” and that the NPCC was “tying into the NHS procurement process to make sure we are restocking”.⁶¹ In some forces officers could deploy spit guards where someone was spitting and using the threat of COVID-19 infection to attack officers; the Police Federation told us that spit guards should be “in the pocket of every single police officer” to protect from the appalling weaponisation of COVID-19 by some individuals.⁶²

46. Officers must be given certainty that the guidance issued to them about the appropriate use of PPE is clear, consistent and comprehensive. Clarity and consistency

56 Police Federation of England and Wales, [‘This is not a training exercise, this is reality’](#), 9 April 2020

57 Police Federation of England and Wales, [‘This is not a training exercise, this is reality’](#), 9 April 2020

58 National Police Chiefs’ Council, [Coronavirus: Guidance on personal protective equipment issues to police forces](#), 9 April 2020

59 Q192 [CC Lisa Winward, CC Garry Forsyth, CC John Robins, CC Peter Goodman], Q118 [CSupt Paul Griffiths], Q167–8 [CC John Robins, CC Lisa Winward]

60 Q118 [PS Simon Kempton]

61 Q28 [DCC Paul Netherton]

62 Q140 [PS Simon Kempton]

are harder to achieve when authorities issue multiple versions of guidance in a short space of time, and when organisations then issue their own. These actions could increase the possibility that officers are following incorrect guidance. *The NPCC must immediately work with Public Health England, the Health and Safety Executive and any other appropriate bodies including the Police Federation to address any confusion resulting from inconsistencies in guidance issued to officers. Thereafter, they should provide a copy of the guidance to us, indicating any changes that were required. In addition, the NPCC should write to us explaining why the advice was issued three times in five days. The Home Office should also explain to the Committee in writing: what conversations have taken place between the department and the NPCC in relation to PPE advice; what role it has played in ensuring that the advice is accurate; how it will assure the Committee that any confusion will be resolved as a matter of urgency; and its plans to ensure that supply of PPE will meet the required levels.*

47. *Individuals who use COVID-19 to threaten police officers—including through coughing or spitting at officers—must be prosecuted swiftly for the crime. Spit guards are an important tool with which to protect officers and must be made readily available to forces where chief constables require them. We ask all forces to write to us explaining their policy for providing spit guards to frontline officers during the COVID-19 outbreak. All use of spit guards must of course be in line with existing safeguards and guidance.*

48. **Providing appropriate PPE to all officers who need it is of paramount importance to ensure an effective policing response to COVID-19 that does not put officers at risk. While we are pleased that the forces who spoke to us have enough PPE for now, we are concerned about gaps and inconsistencies in supplies. The Home Office and NPCC need to ensure there is a secure and robust supply chain for PPE—including building in extra supplies both locally and nationally to ensure forces can cope with surges in demand, and working with the NHS, social care and other sectors to ensure those sectors' supplies aren't put at risk. We welcome the action of those businesses which are reported to have shared spare PPE resource with their local forces, and would encourage others to follow this example as part of the national effort. We recommend that, following clarification to NPCC guidance on when PPE should be used, the National Police Coordination Centre send us their prediction of PPE demand among forces over the next month and then beyond, and current anticipated supply to meet that demand.**

Conclusions and recommendations

About this report

1. The COVID-19 pandemic is an unprecedented situation that poses an urgent threat to public health and safety, and has put the police in the position of dealing with challenges they have never faced before, which they are having to navigate with sensitivity and diligence. We thank the police for the vital work they are doing to counter the spread of the pandemic while continuing to protect our communities from crime and safeguard the most vulnerable in society. They will continue to have our strong support in their work to protect the NHS and save lives. (Paragraph 3)

Enforcement of the new Coronavirus restrictions

2. The vast majority of the public are following Government advice and complying with the new Regulations, and the police are adapting quickly and effectively to challenges in upholding the new law. Adherence to the regulations is principally the responsibility of the public across the country, and we agree that police measures to restrict movement and gatherings will only succeed if the principle of policing by consent is upheld. We welcome the strategy to engage, explain and encourage before considering enforcement, and the determination on the part of the police to uphold the tradition of policing by consent. (Paragraph 19)
3. Given the pace at which the new regulations had to be implemented, it is not surprising that there have been some early problems and errors and we welcome the additional guidance that the police have published because it is important that these do not endure. (Paragraph 20)
4. We welcome the swift clarifications and apologies from forces on social media about cases where the police have got things wrong. Forces need to ensure that there are proper checks in place to ensure errors that are not captured on social media are also corrected. The early evidence and figures shared with us from some forces suggest that the overall police response has been proportionate. Some of the challenges for the police have arisen due to the divergence between the regulations and the different statements from Government. *The Department for Health and Social Care and the Home Office need to ensure that where there is divergence between regulations and messages coming from central Government (for example over shopping for non-essential goods) they continue to provide swift clarity for the public as well as the police; otherwise the police will be left in a difficult position.* (Paragraph 21)
5. It is vital that all forces and all officers understand the distinction between Government advice and legal requirement, and that the tone and tactics they use are appropriate to each. Failing to do so depletes public trust. We will continue to monitor the actions of forces to ensure that a bond of trust is maintained between the police and the public. (Paragraph 22)
6. *We recommend that the NPCC and the College of Policing collate and publish figures for use of new enforcement measures by all UK forces on a weekly basis and monitor where there is significant divergence between forces in the use of enforcement*

measures. The NPCC and the College of Policing should review their guidance at least monthly, and inform the Committee in writing of any changes they plan to make. (Paragraph 23)

7. *Parks and green spaces provide benefits to the health and wellbeing of all members of the public and especially those who do not have access to outdoor space where they live. For families with children and many others, being prevented from using local parks can make it much harder to cope with lockdown. Where people are deliberately flouting the social distancing regulations when using parks, they are making it much harder for others who are adhering to the rules. In those circumstances, intervention by the police is very important. In some cases, local authorities and the police had taken the decision to close parks without having first tried enforcement measures or alternative access arrangements. Especially in urban areas where there are few alternative green spaces, we urge police forces and local authorities to work in partnership, and first consider whether proper enforcement action against those who are breaching the rules would allow parks and green spaces to be kept open for everyone else instead. (Paragraph 24)*

The nature of crime and police demand during lockdown

8. Scrutinising how police and Government safeguard against any increased domestic abuse risk is a priority for the Committee. It is worrying that charities and police forces are reporting an increase in calls as victims face periods of confinement with their abusers. We have therefore issued a further call for evidence on these concerns, with a view to producing a further short, specific report. We encourage anybody with concerns about the wellbeing of themselves or others to contact the services listed in that call for evidence. Individuals at risk of immediate violence or abuse should always call 999 and take steps to protect themselves or their families from violence, including if necessary leaving the home and seeking refuge and support. (Paragraph 28)
9. We encourage the public to remain vigilant, and to stop and think twice before giving any money or personal details away over the phone or in person. (Paragraph 31)
10. Previous Home Affairs Committee reports have set out strong concerns about the weaknesses and inadequacies of Action Fraud and policing arrangements to tackle online crime and fraud. Rising online fraud as a result of COVID-19 is likely to expose those weaknesses further. *We urge the Home Office, National Crime Agency and NPCC to set out what action they are taking to address COVID-19 related online fraud in the short term. We believe it is imperative that the Home Office takes seriously the Committee's previous recommendations and overhauls and modernises action against online fraud as we emerge from this crisis. (Paragraph 32)*
11. *We welcome the commitment from forces to support mental health. It is important that police officers get the support they need both to respond to mental health cases and look after their own mental health during this crisis. Police forces must have the resources to be able adequately to support officers who have had to deal with traumatic incidents, including the aftermath of suicide, and attending deaths suspected as resulting from COVID-19. (Paragraph 34)*

12. The Committee believes that, in times of national emergency only, chief constables should not have to rely on the goodwill of employers alone to make increased use of their trained special constables, should they need to do so. *The Committee therefore recommends that the Home Office immediately addresses the discrepancy in Schedule 7 of the Coronavirus Act 2020, which does not list special constables amongst the types of volunteers employers are compelled to release on full paid leave should they be needed to report for duty by their chief constable.* (Paragraph 35)

Relationship with the criminal justice system

13. Effective law enforcement is a multipartite process. The courts have a crucial role to play in ensuring that crimes committed during the pandemic are dealt with in an appropriate time frame and a professional manner. It is therefore concerning that workers supporting the criminal justice system have not been afforded key worker status. *We recommend that Government review which workers in the criminal justice system have not been afforded key worker status, and consider extending the status to them. They should write to us to inform us of the outcome, and explain the rationale for any decision not to extend the status to workers in the system.* (Paragraph 37)

Provision of COVID-19 tests to police officers

14. We support the Government's decision to prioritise NHS and social care staff for COVID-19 antigen testing. Once testing capacity has been suitably scaled up, however, police officers must be an early priority. This will increase the availability of officers, and therefore the amount of support they are able to provide to the public. *The Home Office should write to us to clarify the plans and timetable for the testing regime to be put in place for police officers. The letter should tell us: when tests will start becoming available to officers; whether the Government's 100,000 target by the end of April includes any tests for police officers; how it will ensure that police are being given accurate information about tests; and if certain police roles or forces will be prioritised for testing, and the reasons why. The Home Office should also explain if police forces will be required to purchase their own tests or if tests will be provided to them from central government once they become available.* (Paragraph 39)

Personal Protective Equipment

15. Officers must be given certainty that the guidance issued to them about the appropriate use of PPE is clear, consistent and comprehensive. Clarity and consistency are harder to achieve when authorities issue multiple versions of guidance in a short space of time, and when organisations then issue their own. These actions could increase the possibility that officers are following incorrect guidance. *The NPCC must immediately work with Public Health England, the Health and Safety Executive and any other appropriate bodies including the Police Federation to address any confusion resulting from inconsistencies in guidance issued to officers. Thereafter, they should provide a copy of the guidance to us, indicating any changes that were required. In addition, the NPCC should write to us explaining why the advice was issued three times in five days. The Home Office should also explain to the Committee in writing: what conversations have taken place between the department and the*

NPCC in relation to PPE advice; what role it has played in ensuring that the advice is accurate; how it will assure the Committee that any confusion will be resolved as a matter of urgency; and its plans to ensure that supply of PPE will meet the required levels. (Paragraph 46)

16. *Individuals who use COVID-19 to threaten police officers—including through coughing or spitting at officers—must be prosecuted swiftly for the crime. Spit guards are an important tool with which to protect officers and must be made readily available to forces where chief constables require them. We ask all forces to write to us explaining their policy for providing spit guards to frontline officers during the COVID-19 outbreak. All use of spit guards must of course be in line with existing safeguards and guidance. (Paragraph 47)*
17. *Providing appropriate PPE to all officers who need it is of paramount importance to ensure an effective policing response to COVID-19 that does not put officers at risk. While we are pleased that the forces who spoke to us have enough PPE for now, we are concerned about gaps and inconsistencies in supplies. The Home Office and NPCC need to ensure there is a secure and robust supply chain for PPE—including building in extra supplies both locally and nationally to ensure forces can cope with surges in demand, and working with the NHS, social care and other sectors to ensure those sectors' supplies aren't put at risk. We welcome the action of those businesses which are reported to have shared spare PPE resource with their local forces, and would encourage others to follow this example as part of the national effort. We recommend that, following clarification to NPCC guidance on when PPE should be used, the National Police Coordination Centre send us their prediction of PPE demand among forces over the next month and then beyond, and current anticipated supply to meet that demand. (Paragraph 48)*

Formal minutes

Wednesday 15 April 2020

Yvette Cooper, in the Chair

Janet Daby	Simon Fell
Dehenna Davison	Tim Loughton
Stephen Doughty	Holly Lynch
Ruth Edwards	Stuart C McDonald
Laura Farris	

Draft Report (*Home Office preparedness for COVID-19 (Coronavirus): Policing*), proposed by the Chair, brought up and read.

Ordered, That the draft Report be read a second time, paragraph by paragraph.

Paragraphs 1 to 48 read and agreed to.

Resolved, That the Report be the First Report of the Committee to the House.

Ordered, That the Chair make the Report to the House.

Ordered, That embargoed copies of the Report be made available, in accordance with the provisions of Standing Order No. 134.

[Adjourned till 9.00 am on Tuesday 21 April

Witnesses

The following witnesses gave evidence. Transcripts can be viewed on the [inquiry publications page](#) of the Committee's website.

Wednesday 18 March 2020

Lucy Moreton , Corporate Officer, Immigration Services Union	Q1–23
DCC Paul Netherton , National Police Chiefs' Council Lead for Civil Contingencies, and Deputy Chief Constable, Devon and Cornwall Police, ACC Owen Weatherill , Strategic Lead, National Police Co-ordination Centre	Q24–59
Emma Moore , Chief Operating Officer, UK Border Force and Angela Perfect , COVID-19 Incident Gold Commander, UK Border Force	Q60–109

Monday 6 April 2020

Sergeant Simon Kempton , National Lead for Covid-19, Police Federation of England and Wales, and Chief Superintendent Paul Griffiths , President, Police Superintendents' Association	Q110–144
Chief Constable Lisa Winward , North Yorkshire Police, Chief Constable Garry Forsyth , Bedfordshire Police, Chief Constable Peter Goodman , Derbyshire Police, and Chief Constable John Robins , West Yorkshire Police.	Q145–196

Published written evidence

The following written evidence was received and can be viewed on the [inquiry publications page](#) of the Committee's website

- 1 Amnesty International UK and Migrant Voice (COR008)
- 2 Asylum Matters, Detention Action, Doctors of the World UK, Freedom From Torture, The No Accommodation Network, Refugee Action, Refugee Council, Scottish Refugee Council, UK Lesbian & Gay Immigration Group (COR0016)
- 3 British Medical Association (COR005)
- 4 Crisis (COR003)
- 5 Doctors of the World UK (COR0017)
- 6 Homeless Link (COR0012)
- 7 Human Trafficking Foundation (COR009)
- 8 Joint Council for the Welfare of Immigrants (COR0011)
- 9 Medical Justice (COR0013)
- 10 Refugee Women Connect (COR0014)
- 11 the3million (COR0010)
- 12 UK Border Force (COR006)
- 13 UK Border Force (COR007)
- 14 UNHCR, The UN Refugee Agency (COR0015)

List of Reports from the Committee during the current Parliament

All publications from the Committee are available on the [publications page](#) of the Committee's website. The reference number of the Government's response to each Report is printed in brackets after the HC printing number.

Session 2019–21

First Special Report	Serious Youth Violence: Government Response to the Committee's Sixteenth Report of Session 2017–2019	HC 57
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