

**Classification: Public**

**Key Decision: No**

## **Gravesham Borough Council**

**Report to:** Crime and Disorder Scrutiny Committee

**Date:** 27 October 2022

**Reporting officer:** Topic Review Group

**Subject:** Review of Town Centre Crime

### **Purpose and summary of report:**

This report provides the Committee with the findings and recommendations of the Town Centre Crime Topic Review.

### **Recommendations:**

1. The Committee is asked to:
  - i) Consider and comment upon the findings of the Topic Review Group and on the recommendations to be submitted to the next Gravesham Community Safety Partnership meeting in January 2023 as detailed in this report.

<b>Key Implications:</b>	
<b>Item</b>	<b>Implications</b>
<b>Legal</b>	The Council has a statutory obligation to work with partner agencies to address crime and anti-social behaviour and Crime (Crime and Disorder Act 1998 and Serious Organised Crime Act 2015).
<b>Finance and Value for Money</b>	There are no identified or specific financial implications.
<b>Corporate Plan</b>	Work undertaken by the Gravesham Community Safety Partnership (and which is subject to overview by the Crime and Disorder Scrutiny Committee makes a direct contribution to People and Place in the Corporate Plan.
<b>Climate Change</b>	None.

## **1. Introduction**

- 1.1 Terms of Reference for the Town Centre Crime Topic Review Group were agreed in October 2021 together with the Group's membership:

Councillor John Caller (Chair)

Councillor Brian Francis

Councillor Ejaz Aslam

Councillor Frank Wardle

1.2 A scoping meeting between the Group Members and Council Officers took place in March 2022 to identify the priorities and objectives of the Review and the process that would be followed. At this meeting, Members agreed:

- that the nature of crime in the town centre, either experienced or perceived, appeared to differ during the daytime and in the evening/night-time economy
- that a multi-agency meeting would be arranged inviting Council Department representatives, partner organisations operating or delivering services within the town centre, business representatives, transport providers and representatives from the voluntary sector in order that they could inform the Review Group of their experience and understanding of crime and any contributory factors
- that participants in the multi-agency meeting would be invited to offer their suggestions on steps that might be taken to help prevent crime and improve perceptions in order that the town centre could be recognised as a safe and welcoming place.

## **2. Multi-Agency Meeting**

2.1 The multi-agency meeting was held in June 2022 and was well-attended by both statutory and non-statutory partners, local businesses and two young people who were at that time completing work experience placements with the Council.

### **2.2 Town Centre Policing Resources**

Kent Police colleagues were invited to begin by explaining policing resources that were allocated to the town centre. Insp. James Beautridge confirmed that Gravesend had a dedicated Town Centre Policing Team comprised of 3 police officers and 2 Police Community Support Officers (PCSOs). The Team was recognised as a benchmark in the county for crime management in town centre areas. This Team operates during day-time hours whilst the Community Policing Team comprised of a Sergeant and 6 officers covers policing in the night-time economy with particular attention being given to Friday and Saturday nights (21:00hrs-03:00hrs).

Proactive work undertaken by the Town Centre Policing Team included their partnership working alongside Council officers, the G-Safe Business Crime Reduction Initiative, local businesses and security staff. A specific and recent example was provided of collaborative efforts that had resulted in 3-month Closure Orders being obtained against 8 shop premises (7 of which were immediately within the town centre) that had been involved in the selling of illegal tobacco and cigarettes. The Town Centre Policing Team responds to a variety of incidents throughout the day from shoplifting and street drinking to more serious criminal activity such as drug dealing and robberies and have a track record of having achieved very positive results.

### **2.3 The Issues Identified**

The Topic Review Chair then invited other representatives at the meeting to give their views/comments on their perceptions of crime in the town centre.

**The following is a distillation of the key points that were raised:**

- The greatest problem faced by businesses was felt to be anti-social behaviour (ASB) rather than crime during the daytime, often involving young people generally aged between 10-18 years and frequently during the afternoon/early evening after school. Behaviour included causing a disturbance to other clientele and verbal abuse to staff. It was acknowledged that if young people are in school uniform and their school can be identified, the Police Schools Officer would be able to raise the matter with school staff. One fast food outlet described that they had a 'Staff Safe' scheme in place as a result of ongoing problems with of ASB involving young people. They employed a security guard in the evening but did not have security staff during the day, however, as a member of the G-Safe Radionet system, they had found that security staff from other would come to their assistance if necessary.
- G-Safe reported that the Initiative encourages businesses to report all lower-level ASB issues as littering, verbal abuse, graffiti etc. as well as more serious offences as these too, can have a very negative impact on perceptions of the town centre.
- Attendees raised the issue of Police response times/delays in Police attendance when incidents are called in and lack of feedback following the reporting of incidents. The meeting heard that there is a programme of recruitment in place which should mean additional police officers in the Borough that will improve capacity to respond to calls for assistance/attendance in future.
- Councillors and businesses commented that their constituents and clientele respectively, informed them that they feel the town centre is 'unsafe'. The Group agreed that this perception is largely perpetuated by social media commentary and print and online press coverage of more serious/violent offences (which are rare) which are reported in such a way that they serve to create a fear of crime. Some sections of the community and older people, in particular, have a perception of Gravesend being a 'no go' area.
- Both Kent Police and the Violence Reduction Unit (VRU) colleagues present at the meeting confirmed that crime (in general and specifically in relation to serious youth violence in the VRU's experience) is not high locally compared to many other areas, including other parts of Kent.
- It was suggested that the absence of visible uniformed presence (other than Police) during the daytime to deal with minor ASB issues, interact with and provide reassurance to the public, had a negative impact.
- Recorded crime data for the town centre Wards indicated a reduction in offences over recent years. Whilst some of the reductions seen would clearly have been linked to Covid-19 and a much-reduced footfall due to the closure of many businesses during the pandemic, most recent data suggested that many reductions were being sustained.
- British Transport Police (BTP) data demonstrates that Gravesend experiences lower rates of incidents than many other areas and that it is not identified by BTP as a 'hot spot' town.
- Whilst some ASB occurring in the town centre is linked to young people, it is often the behaviour of adults that contributes to negative impressions e.g.,

rowdy/noisy behaviour, drunkenness (street drinkers), open use of bad language etc. It was felt that there was a lack of respect or consideration both for the environment and other people.

- The presence of rough sleepers can be intimidating for the public and has caused some problems in some parts of the town centre e.g., Gravesend Market, New Road. However, it was noted that the number of people sleeping on the streets has reduced thanks to the interventions of the Council's relatively new Homeless Team.

## **2.4 Suggestions for addressing the issues identified**

2.4.1 Having shared views and their direct experience/knowledge of crime and ASB in the town centre, attendees were invited to offer suggestions that might help address the issues identified. These included the following:

- There was an opportunity for closer working between youth workers from The Gr@nd and McDonalds staff (as the key venue most frequently used by young people and that experienced the majority of youth-related ASB issues). It was agreed that youth workers contact details would be shared so that youth workers could engage with young people and potentially help to moderate behaviour/prevent situations from escalating.
- There should be a concerted effort/campaign to 'sell' the positives of the town centre and to regain pride in the area by encouraging an attitudinal change e.g., promoting the ongoing regeneration of and planned improvements for the town centre. Consideration should be given to developing a positive publicity campaign e.g., #AmazingGravesend, #GoodNewsGravesend, to make both residents and potential visitors of cultural and leisure/socialising opportunities on offer. The creation of advert-length 'mini-films' focusing on the social, leisure and cultural offer was suggested and that these could perhaps be shown prior to cinema showings at The Woodville.
- Using all opportunities, including social media messaging, to communicate that Gravesend town centre is a safe environment e.g., countering negative coverage of incidents that affect public perceptions with information that provides context and demonstrates that Gravesend is not a 'hot spot' compared with other areas.
- Consideration to be given to the viability of having a uniformed non-police presence in the town centre to provide reassurance and assist or deal with minor issues.
- Ensuring that businesses affected by rough sleepers are aware of how to report to the Council's Homeless Team so that they can be appropriately supported.
- Continuing to use enforcement powers when justified e.g., applying the Public Space Protection Order in the town centre as a tool for dealing with issues caused by street drinkers.
- Ensuring that minor criminal damage e.g., such as graffiti is reported in order that information can be properly collated to assist with the potential identification of those responsible.

- Increasing or raising awareness of activities available for young people in the town centre and encouraging them to take part in them and identifying further activities that might be attractive to young people.
- Exploring opportunities to work with young people and for them to act as the 'communicator' with their peers both to ascertain their views on safety in the town centre and to encourage pride in the area e.g., utilising the Gr@nd's Gifted Young Gravesend reporters to cover positive news, raise awareness of what is on offer and of the impact of low level ASB.
- Using approaches that encourage a shared responsibility for respect for the town centre's physical environment, for those working in local businesses and for other people visiting Gravesend e.g., national Shop Kind Campaign.

2.4.2 Whilst not raised at the meeting itself, several other suggestions have subsequently been received which it is felt should be included in this report, namely that:

- Efforts should be made to establish 'Safe Zones' or 'Safe Spaces' within a range of venues across the town centre with participating premises having clear signage. These would allow anyone finding themselves feeling vulnerable or unsafe to go into the premises where staff can take them to the Safe Space and support and advise them.
- Subject to resources, improvements to the environment to improve feelings of safety in the town centre to be considered e.g., enhancing lighting (both public street lighting and lighting within/outside premises) where it is poor and ensuring that CCTV signage is adequate and visible to act both as a deterrent and as a means of providing reassurance.
- Evening and night-time events promoting safety messages should be considered as a means of developing confidence and providing reassurance.

### 3. Final Recommendations

3.1 Having considered experiences and discussed possible suggestions for addressing the issues identified, the Topic Review Group agreed the following final recommendations:

- i) That there should be a concerted campaign aimed at changing public perceptions of Gravesend through accurate and positive reporting of the 'real' levels of crime so that fear of crime and negative impressions of risks to personal safety can be minimised.
- ii) Working in partnership is essential to continue achieving further reductions in crime (and ASB) - this includes not just statutory services and businesses but local residents too. Underlining the message of the need to report incidents is crucial to ensuring that partnership activity and any additional resources are properly targeted.
- iii) There needs to be more effective communication of 'good news' about what the town centre has to offer, ongoing improvements and planned activities, to encourage a greater footfall both in the daytime and the evenings, so that Gravesend builds a reputation of as a safe socialising environment.
- iv) Greater awareness of the range of existing activities that are available for young people to access needs to be achieved to encourage take-up

together with more consultation with young people about what they feel they would like to see made available to them.

- v) Subject to resources, a series of community events should be held to promote Gravesham as a whole.
  - vi) The displaying of messages about expected standards of behaviour e.g., 'Anti-Social Behaviour will not be tolerated' to be promoted.
  - vii) Consideration should be given to the creation of a separate website dedicated to celebrating good news about the Borough e.g., Amazing Gravesham, to supplement the Council's website which is primarily focused on services and the Discover Gravesham website which concentrates on information for visitors and tourists.
- 3.2 The Topic Review Group agreed that the findings of the review would be reported back to both the Crime and Disorder Scrutiny Committee on 27 October 2022 and to the next Gravesham Community Safety Partnership meeting (January 2023).

<b>Secondary Implications</b>	
<b>Risk Assessment</b>	Failure to work collaboratively with partner agencies in tackling crime and ASB would be a failure to meet our statutory responsibilities and would undermine the confidence of the public in our ability to respond effectively to their community safety concerns.
<b>Data Protection Impact Assessment</b>	<p><i>A data protection impact assessment (DPIA) should be carried out at the start of any major project involving the use of personal data or if you are making a significant change to an existing process.</i></p> <p>a. Does the project/change being recommended through this paper involve the processing of <a href="#">personal data</a> or <a href="#">special category data</a> or <a href="#">criminal offence data</a>? A definition of each type of data can be found on the Information Commissioner's Office website via the above links. No.</p> <p>b. If yes to question a, have you completed and attached a DPIA including Data Protection Officer advice? N/A</p> <p>c. If no to question b, please seek advice from your nominated DPIA assessor or the Information Governance Team at <a href="mailto:gdpr@medway.gov.uk">gdpr@medway.gov.uk</a>. N/A</p>
<b>Equality Impact Assessment</b>	<p>a. Does the decision being made or recommended through this paper have potential to cause adverse impact or discriminate against different groups in the community? If yes, please explain answer. N/A</p> <p>b. Does the decision being made or recommended through this paper make a positive contribution to promoting equality? If yes, please explain answer. N/A</p> <p><i>In submitting this report, the Chief Officer doing so is confirming that they have given due regard to the equality impacts of the decision being considered, as noted in the table above</i></p>
<b>Crime and Disorder</b>	As stated above.
<b>Digital and website implications</b>	None at this stage although some of the recommendations of the Topic Review Group, would require the support of the Council's Digital Team.
<b>Safeguarding children and vulnerable adults</b>	The safeguarding of vulnerable young people and adults is corporately a high priority for the Council and is also a strategic priority for the CSP. Partnership activity that aims to improve safety within Gravesend town centre, which is accessed by children and adults alike, will contribute to safeguarding them from harm.