

Gwent Police boss' concern over crime stats

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By Natalie Crockett - Crime reporter

GWENT'S Crime Commissioner Ian Johnston told NATALIE CROCKETT the force may not be recording crime properly.

POLICE in Gwent may not be recording crimes properly in a bid to lower crime figures, the Police and Crime Commissioner claimed.

Gwent's PCC Ian Johnston said he is concerned officers are not classifying incidents correctly, which means recorded crime statistics do not give a true picture of what is happening on the streets.

He believes in some cases officers are logging incidents as less serious ones, which are not recorded as crimes, because of pressure from above.

He said something like an argument in the street or a fight that should be categorised as a public order offence may instead be being classed as being drunk and disorderly.

This is not registered on the quarterly crime statistics, which gives the picture that crime rates are lower than they actually are, he said.

Mr Johnston said: "Cops do as they are told because it is a disciplined organisation. Feedback from the public on their experience with cops is that there's an emphasis on whether something is a crime or not rather than getting on and dealing with it and giving the public what they want.

"We in Gwent are not alone, it's national. People are obsessed with driving down crime and the level of recording crime but the public don't believe the stats anyway. What they want is the proper service - reduce the problem and the stats will look after themselves.

"Police have a large degree of control over what becomes a crime and which incidents are recorded as a crime and I'm not saying that anyone is fiddling the books but it is the interpretation of the incident."

Gwent Police recorded the largest fall in crime in England and Wales at 17 per cent last year compared with 2011, but public confidence was among the lowest in the country with just 53 per cent of people saying they were satisfied with the service they received.

Mr Johnston believes that if crime statistics were correct, public confidence would be higher.

"Something's not right, the two ought to go together"

"We have a 53 per cent confidence rate and what that means is that one in two people in Gwent have not got confidence in the police.

"They (the public) don't care if the matter gets a tick as a crime or not, what they care about is having something done about it. And if you are feeling you are being fobbed off that doesn't give you confidence."

A report by the Office of National Statistics, which collates crime statistics, has previously said police appeared to "overstate the true rate in which crime is falling.

This followed the publication of figures, which showed police recorded crime in England and Wales fell by 41 per cent since 2002/03, while the Crime Survey for England and Wales, which records residents' experience of crime saw only a 26 per cent fall over the same period. This gap continues to get wider year on year.

Police boss wants to increase public confidence

Increasing public confidence and putting victims first is one of Mr Johnston's priorities in his Police and Crime Plan launched last month.

He sees this as his biggest challenge but one that is key to policing in Gwent, because if people feel they will be listened to they are more likely to report crime, which officers can then tackle, he said.

He also wants to bridge the gap between what the force thinks is important and what is important to residents.

For example, he said while police thinks PACT meetings are effective, the majority of the public believe they are a waste of time.

He said attendance is patchy, in many cases officers set the agenda not residents and while a lot of talking is done about issues not much is done to tackle them.

He said: "There are one of two exceptions - Caerleon is a really good one - in the main it is not doing what it says on the tin. They are not addressing and resolving the issues."

Also part of his remit is the force's estates and soon residents will be able to go online and see the status of all current and future plans for police stations and buildings.

He said this was in a bid to alleviate some of the bad feeling surrounding the force's closure of station front offices, to make people feel more involved in what is happening in their communities and to prevent rumours about police stations closing.

Mr Johnston is also in charge of the force's budget and while Chief Constable Carmel Napier makes decisions on how many police officers and staff are

required, it is Mr Johnston who grants the funding.

While he admits times are tough financially, he believes many savings can be made by working more efficiently and through working closely with neighbouring PCCs and forces where possible.

He also pledged that if the time came for redundancies, staff and unions would be heavily involved in the process.

He said: "If we are going to have some happen then let's do it together so people feel involved in the process and people don't feel after the event that they had it happen to them and not with them."

Keen to dispel some of misconceptions that his role is "cushy" Mr Johnston has invited sceptical members of the public to visit him to see what his job involves and says many have since changed their minds.

He maintains the Police and Crime Commissioner's office, which includes him, his deputy Paul Harris a chief executive, finance officer and staff, is more cost effective than the former police authority, which was around £198,000 a year.

Gwent's running costs are lower than other authorities in the country, he says, and currently costs 0.56 per cent of the overall force budget - well below the 1.2 per cent allowance.

Of the role he said: "I was in the job for 39 years and these last six months have been the most demanding compared to any thing I did in policing in terms of commitment.

"Some people have no idea of the demands of this job from first thing in the morning until the last thing at night and that does annoy me."

'Our processes mean crime data is accurate' - Assistant Chief Constable

Temporary Assistant Chief Constable Paul Symes, said Gwent Police has robust processes to ensure their data is accurate.

He said: "We are not complacent and remain vigilant on the issue as anything less may impact on public confidence in the police.

"There are clear standards in place for recording crime data which all forces must comply with, and we have dedicated individuals who oversee this process to ensure that the highest ethical standards are maintained.

"In relation to officers arresting and charging more people for being drunk and disorderly, this is part of a deliberate strategy of early intervention to deal with people robustly before they have a chance to commit public order offences and violent crime.

"It's worth noting that our strategy is also influenced by a series of stated cases that restrict the situations where police officers can be the victims of public order offences. An arrest for being drunk and disorderly can be more appropriate in these circumstances.

"We will continue to work with Her Majesty's Inspectorate of Constabulary (HMIC) to build greater confidence in our crime statistics as they conduct their national inspection into crime recording."

ARGUS COMMENT

GWENT'S Police and Crime Commissioner suggests today his police force and others may not be recording crimes properly creating an inaccurate set of crime statistics.

With police forces across the country targeted to reduce crime, it is easy to see why he makes the claims that officers might downplay incidents.

But despite the highest drops in crime in England and Wales in the last year, public confidence in the police in Gwent is among the lowest.

Typically forthright Mr Johnston said the obsession with driving down recorded crime is not making people think they are getting a good service from their police force.

And that needs to change.

The public's fear of crime is something every force wants to tackle but ticking boxes and filling out forms may not be the solution.

Rather than categorising crime, police officers should be dealing with it, he argues.

In his first six months, Mr Johnston has spoken his mind, unafraid of appearing unpopular with his ideas on how policing should be done.

Only time will tell if the PCC's approach will manage to turn the tide of public opinion about his force alongside a reduction in crime.

But there won't be many in Gwent Police who hope he doesn't succeed.

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