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Essex Police and Crime Commissioner speaks out over performance culture in policing
A CHANGE in the culture and ethics in the police needs to come from the top, says Essex's Police and Crime Commissioner.

PCC Nick Alston appeared before parliament's Public Administration Select Committee's inquiry into crime statistics on Tuesday, which heard about the perverse effects that a performance target culture can have on police decision-making.

He said: "It is crucial that crime is recorded correctly and ethically by our police forces. This is a matter of police integrity, of treating victims with respect, and of ensuring that officers have the most accurate possible information as they work both to prevent crime and bring criminals to justice."

Mr Alston added if a police force is set a target of reducing house burglary by 20 per cent then resources can be moved and recording of crime skewed to meet the target.

"Firstly, significant police resources may be taken from other policing activities and dedicated to tackling burglary. If there is a significant burglary problem in a county, then this may be the correct operational response, but in moving significant police resources there is always the danger that the Thin Blue Line becomes too thin and unable to meet other crucial policing tasks.

"Secondly, there may be cultural pressure within a police force to reduce the number of incidents recorded as burglaries to increase the chances of meeting the performance target. For instance, an attempt to gain entry to a house via the front door or a window may be recorded as criminal damage rather than an attempted burglary. This matters because officers should have the discretion and judgement to report crime accurately and ethically. It also matters because victims have a right to expect high quality service, and the victim of an attempted burglary will have the opportunity to receive specialist crime prevention advice which a victim of criminal damage would not necessarily obtain. Finally, it matters because police officers need the most accurate possible data about crime locations and criminal behaviour to catch and arrest burglars.

"The evidence put before the Public Administration Select Committee strongly suggested that performance targets – whether imposed by politicians or police authorities – led to performance cultures developing in police forces across the country," explained Mr Alston.

He continued: "Dozens of officers have told me that relatively recently there was a performance culture in Essex, and some initiatives, such as the imposition of time-based targets for the number of arrests, distorted officer behaviour and made it more difficult for them to exercise professional discretion in dealing with an incident.

"I am pleased to learn that the last time that Chief Officer bonuses for performance were paid in Essex was in 2009-10. Former Chief Constable Jim Barker-McCardle and his Chief Officer team did not receive any bonuses for performance."

He praised Chief Constable Steven Kavanagh's leadership saying: "Chief Constable Kavanagh has made it clear that he expects the recording of crime in Essex to follow the highest ethical standards, and I totally support that position. I have spoken with the Crime Registrar in the Audit and Compliance department for Essex Police and reviewed the processes in place in our county for ensuring the integrity of crime data. I am reassured that they are robust, and a peer review by a neighbouring force will start shortly.

"Performance cultures have long tails. In Essex, we have the leadership in place to ensure that any surviving vestiges of such a culture are eradicated."

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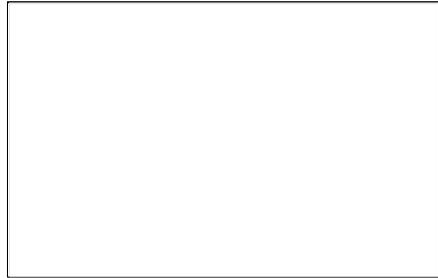
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