

TASK AND FINISH GROUP REPORT
REVIEW INTO CRIME AND ANTI-SOCIAL BEHAVIOUR IN
TAUNTON TOWN CENTRE

Introduction

This report sets out the findings of the Task and Finish Group (“the group”) charged to review crime and anti-social behaviour in Taunton’s town centre and adjacent urban areas.

At the heart of crime and anti-social behaviour is a lack of respect for values and basic consideration for others. A small proportion of the population can have a major negative impact upon communities.

The group’s conclusions are founded on examination of witnesses and written material. These comments are robust and will be uncomfortable reading for some.

Both Taunton Deane Borough Council (“TDBC”) and Avon and Somerset Constabulary (“the Police”) have failed in their primary duty to protect the citizen. There is presently a culture to appease a few, at the consequence of the many.

Partnership working takes place between TDBC and the Police. This ‘one team’ operates in association with other agencies, including Somerset County Council (“SCC”) and the third sector.

Neither TDBC, as the elected custodians of Taunton’s town centre, or the Police, as the public body employed to combat crime, are at the present time taking the lead to tackle crime and anti-social behaviour. Both need to take robust and expedient action.

Members of the Group

Councillor Ian Morrell (Chairman); Councillor Simon Coles; Councillor Dave Durdan; Councillor Habib Farbahi; and Councillor Roger Habgood.

Background

Over recent months TDBC councillors have been informed of the increased level of concern caused by crime and anti-social behaviour in and around Taunton’s town centre. This includes, but is not exclusive to, theft from businesses, drug dealing and consumption, criminal damage and anti-social behaviour caused by rough sleeping.

At TDBC’s Full Council meeting on the 2nd October 2018 councillors approved motions by Councillor Habib Farbahi and Councillor Simon Nicholls to:

- (1) Engage with all businesses in the town centre to understand their challenges and see if contributions via the radio link systems can help and support their businesses. Taunton Deane and the new authority have to come together with the business community to ensure a safe environment for them to operate so that they can survive these difficult times;
- (2) Establish a task and finish group to investigate crime and anti-social behaviour in Taunton's town centre and provide possible solutions.

Terms of Reference and Objective of the Review

"To make Taunton town centre and the broader Taunton urban area safer from crime and/or anti-social behaviour by tackling crime; rationalise the perception of such; and to encourage increased footfall."

Four areas were identified for investigation:

1. Crime and anti-social behaviour issues effecting businesses and the broader Taunton town centre area;
2. The closed-circuit television ("CCTV") contract and performance;
3. Rough sleepers; and
4. Statistics, perception and the impact of crime and anti-social behaviour.

Links to Corporate Aims / Priorities

The group's investigation is fundamental to TDBC's Corporate Strategy which states that TDBC should be:

"Working with our communities to keep Taunton Deane a great place in which to live, work, learn and enjoy."

It addresses Key Theme 2 – Business and Enterprise from TDBC's adopted Corporate Strategy 2016-2020 and the key issues TDBC seek to influence and improve:

1. *Encourage inward investment and the promotion of the district as a place in which to visit and do business;*
2. *Promote the Taunton town centre and the existing 'gems' such as the Museum of Somerset and Castle Green.*

It also addresses Key Theme 3 – Our Place from the aforementioned Corporate Strategy and the following key issues TDBC seek to influence and improve:

1. *We [TDBC] want to keep Taunton Deane a place to be proud of and one which is well maintained, welcoming to residents, visitors and businesses and is easy to get around;*
2. *Ensure our high streets are clean and attractive places to visit.*

Process

There was a delay in undertaking the review immediately after the 2nd October 2018 TDBC motion due to corporate priorities and insufficient TDBC resource. This led to the group initially meeting on the 8th January 2019. Witnesses were examined at the Albemarle Centre on the 19th February 2019. The group met on the 26th February 2019 to determine its conclusions and recommendations.

Businesses and members of the public were invited to provide submissions on Taunton town centre crime and anti-social experiences. Many did, and these are annexed to this report.

On disbandment of TDBC in April 2019 it is expected that the contents of this report will be actioned by the subsequent district council, West Somerset and Taunton Council (“WSATC”).

Finance / Resource Implications

Funding requirements to ensure the delivery of the recommendations requires confirmation, save for the group’s recommendation to ensure twelve continuous months of street wardens totalling £113,880, payable from TDBC’s general reserves (which presently stand at £2.088 million – a balance above the recommended minimum reserves level approved in TDBC’s budget strategy of £1.7 million).

Partnership Implications

The recommendations will have an implication on partnership working between the various agencies. This will include TDBC taking a proactive role in leading efforts to tackle crime and anti-social behaviour.

Conclusions

The following are presented following examination of witnesses and written material:

1. It was suggested to the group that both TDBC and the Police are presently failing in their primary public duty to protect the citizen, which includes businesses, residents and visitors to the town centre of Taunton.
2. Submissions to the group by concerned businesses and members of the public include:
 - a. David Malcolm, from Rowcliffes, who has been broken into twice by the same man in the last two months - costing £1,000 a time. He said: “I have had to update security because the insurance people aren’t happy. The security fitter said it was absurd because the only place you’d find this kind

of security is a bank. My staff are afraid to walk up East Reach on their lunch breaks."

- b. Philippe Messy said: "Not being British, I have been told to **** off back to my country. I have witnessed more than five times drug dealing the most shocking one was in front of my kid's school.
 - c. Simon Midge said: "As a former police officer of 23 years and former member of the town centre team i feel that it is unsafe to take my young family into the town given the presence of aggressive beggars, street drinking and drunkenness, open and unashamed drug dealing and use to the point we will travel to Bristol to shop, the town centre is feral and has been declining over the last few years."
 - d. Melanie and Richard Sekules spoke for traumatic experiences in which they were assaulted. Mr Sekules works at his tattoo shop on Each Reach with the door closed, he takes a packed lunch so he doesn't have to leave the shop, and regularly witnesses drug deals, public urination and members of the public being refused. He says he was 'savagely attacked' outside his shop at 11am by two youths. He had to face his children with two black eyes after the attack. Mel has been spat at and shouted at while out in town with her baby, and now avoids going into town.
 - e. Celia Rowan, who works in the town centre, said: "I find it harder and harder to do my real job, as I now spend so much of my working day, chasing drug and alcohol addicted thieves from the shop where I work. If I leave the shop for a lunch break, I am constantly pestered for money or cigarettes, by these same people."
 - f. Tina Ball wrote about her experience being singles out and shouted at by a group of drug users in the town. She said: I don't consider myself sheltered or frail in any manner, but this experience was genuinely terrifying. What makes the whole thing worse is this is the town where I live."
 - g. Gina Collins said: "Just last week I was at the ATM and one of the rough sleepers came up to me and another older lady and in a very rough voice shouted "you owe me money" "I want it now" really hassling us."
3. When examined by the group, TDBC's anti-social behaviour team lacked credibility due to their lack of knowledge and understanding of the issues. They were unable to appropriately answer questions on the current issues or advance a meaningful strategy to improve the present position. The group considers that TDBC's anti-social behaviour team suffers from a skillset deficit and/or poor management.
 4. It is noted that the Police has experienced financial cuts due to austerity. Considering present policing influences, the Chief Inspector in command of West Somerset and individual Police staff are attempting to achieve their best efforts.
 5. The group submit that Taunton Deane suffers an inequity on policing resources compared to the level of precept paid. This leads to the Police failing to address crime and anti-social behaviour within Taunton's town centre. The problem is compounded by the loss of the Police custody suite from Taunton to Bridgwater.

6. The group note that the Police role of Area Commander for West Somerset has been downgraded from the rank of Chief Superintendent to Chief Inspector.
7. The Police lack presence and are not responding to crimes in a manner expected by the Police's mission, vision and values to serve, protect and respect with outstanding policing for everyone by being caring, courageous, inclusive and learning.
8. The group suggests Avon and Somerset's Police and Crime Commissioner ("the PCC") too often sets priorities which can be seen as diverting resource from mainstream policing priorities. This leads, in part, to a failure to address drug related crime and shoplifting.
9. From April 2019 the total increase in Police funding, after the council tax precept rise averaging £24 per annum for a Band D property, coupled with new Home Office funding, will boost the PCC's net expenditure budget by £21 million. £17 million is required to meet rising costs. The PCC suggests that the remaining £4 million of new funds will be invested in the policing service for local residents and tackling local priorities including burglary, drug crime, violent crime and the recruitment of one hundred additional officers.
10. Unless Taunton Deane benefits from strong advocacy, the group submit that the additional £4 million for Police, out of the additional £21 million raised, will be inadequate to address the contemporaneous need suffered by Taunton Deane.
11. The present 'one team' partnership employed to combat crime, anti-social behaviour and rough sleeping includes TDBC and the Police. The partnership lacks leadership, strategy, and accountability.
12. In 2016, and at a cost of circa £20 thousand, TDBC instigated a Public Space Protection Order ("PSPO") to benefit Taunton's town centre. PSPOs deal with a particular nuisance within an area suffering a detrimental effect on the quality of life for those in the local community. Anti-social behaviour was sought to be addressed in significant part by TDBC's PSPO.
13. At the time of this report, neither TDBC and/or the Police have issued any prosecutions under a PSPO. The group finds this inaction woeful.
14. Musgrove Park Hospital ("MPH") and the South Western Ambulance Service ("SWAS") are applauded for the competent manner they discharge security functions for the benefit of patients, staff and visitors.
15. Issues suffered by MPH and SWAS are exacerbated by the failure of the 'one team' partnership to support early resolution to drug/alcohol dependency and mental health issues.
16. This problem in part has been caused since removal of funding from the Somerset Drugs and Alcohol Service ("SDAS") which has let that organisation to withdraw its regular drug testing regime and which formed part of the basis

for successful Drug Rehabilitation Requirement Orders (“DRRO”) being imposed by the Courts. With the removal of this testing, those addicted to drugs have lost an important element leading to compliance with the enforcement of the DRROs. Addictions so continue, and crime is consequently committed to fund the habit.

17. Charities and voluntary groups are commended for their efforts in seeking to improve the welfare of those who call upon their services.
18. Taunton Street Pastors offer a crucial service that assists both physical and emotional needs.
19. Pub Watch provides beneficial assistance to ensure reduced anti-social behaviour for the night-time economy.
20. TDBC has a duty to provide or secure the provision of advice and information about homelessness and the prevention of homelessness, free of charge. This advice and assistance must be made available to any person in the district. Advice and information services must be designed to meet the needs of people within the district. The particular needs of the following groups must be considered:
 - a. People released from prison or youth detention accommodation;
 - b. Care leavers;
 - c. Former members of the regular armed forces;
 - d. Victims of domestic abuse;
 - e. People leaving hospital;
 - f. People suffering from a mental illness or impairment; and
 - g. Any other group that the authority identifies as being at particular risk of homelessness in their district.
21. Rough sleeping and consequential crime and anti-social-behaviour is exacerbated due to TDBC’s present homelessness strategy, and the proliferation of charities and agency support that propose Taunton as a preferred destination for rough sleepers over neighbouring towns. In the alternative, the present rough sleeping policy is defective.
22. The group’s view relating to paragraph 21 is evidenced by statistics detailing the number of rough sleepers in Taunton, compared to other districts within Somerset. During examination the group were informed by TDBC and ARC, a Taunton charity administering homelessness issues, that Taunton has up to forty rough sleepers, with twenty known rough sleepers in the preceding week. This compares to Bridgwater where there are between two and twelve; Mendip, where there are up to fifteen; and South Somerset where there are up to five.
23. Businesses and residences along East Reach are suffering abnormally high levels of crime and anti-social behaviour due to the presence of Lindley House, located along East Reach. Under examination the group were informed of a reluctance by Lindley House, administered by ARC, to exclude residents who commit serious crime and/or anti-social behaviour either within its premises or

in public. This position has since been corrected by ARC's CEO, who confirms that residents in breach of Lindley House's crime and/or anti-social behaviour policy will be excluded – including for serious acts undertaken in public. However, due to inadequate provision by the public and third sectors for related services, namely penal and/or rehabilitation (alcohol, drug and mental health), excluded residents are faced with little option but to return to Lindley House. Despite efforts by ARC to assist these residents, a cycle of behaviour can ensue, with the source of the problem not being addressed.

24. Similar issues connected to crime and anti-social behaviour exist for businesses and residential property due to the location of the Taunton Open Door, situated along Mount Street.
25. The group are concerned for the welfare of rough sleepers, including their needs in any climate. However, the issue of cleansing litter and associated living following rough sleeping and or drug usage is not being promptly or properly or addressed by TDBC.
26. In the fight to tackle theft, businesses are not receiving appropriate support from the Police. It was reported that shop lifting from TK Maxx in any one-year amounts to circa £100 thousand.
27. Despite businesses employing significant security measures, due to the present high levels of crime and anti-social behaviour businesses are concerned that they are unable to fulfil their duty of care to both employees and customers.
28. The Police request crimes be reported. The system of reporting via 101 and electronic mediums is onerous with limited to nil response from the police. Furthermore, despite crime recording, the Police do not take appropriate subsequent action. This includes failing to apprehend known criminals who have been prohibited from town centre businesses.
29. Whilst temporarily employed by TDBC, street wardens were able to act as first responders. The manner in which street wardens performed their duties is commended. Street wardens act as a conduit for assisting the public and reporting crimes. Furthermore, as street wardens do not benefit from powers of arrest informal resolution often occurs, which can include the return of stolen items.
30. TDBC's *ad hoc* employment of the street wardens was ill-judged. Although initially employed to address rough sleeping in car parks, the role of street wardens expanded to broader town centre anti-social behaviour issues. Street wardens enabled a sense of security, which is otherwise absent.
31. Weston-Super-Mare employ street wardens as part of a strategy to assist against crime and anti-social behaviour. The duration of street wardens needs to be meaningful in order to provide operational effect.
32. Closed circuit television ("CCTV") has a pivotal role in combatting live crimes,

whilst providing evidential support during Police charging and Court cases. His Honour Judge Ticehurst, Resident Judge at Taunton Crown Court, reports that defendants often plead guilty when confronted with CCTV evidence, whereas absent such evidence they contest the matter no doubt hoping that potential witnesses may fail to attend Court and/or fail to give evidence sufficient to lead to a conviction.

33. The CCTV operators are complimented for their work. Located in Bridgwater and under contract with Sedgemoor District Council (“SDC”), the operators work within a busy control room. However, considering the annual expenditure by TDBC of circa £250 thousand, the group is concerned that not enough operator resource is dedicated to address Taunton’s CCTV needs.
34. On examination, TDBC has been negligent by not facilitating an appropriate CCTV contract and service level agreement with SDC. This negligence is compounded by the fact that TDBC has failed to ensure that CCTV cameras are fit for purpose, or that the contract represents value for money.
35. The group were informed of unhelpful encroachments by SDC and Police that led in 2016 to the closure of the crime reduction partnership known as Somerset Businesses Against Crime (“SBAC”). SBAC operated as a financially independent unit. The loss of the scheme is unfortunate and demonstrates the disparate motives of TDBC, SDC and the Police. It also suggests that those responsible for making that decision had little to no regard or comprehension of the consequences that we now know has led to an increase in crime and anti-social behaviour.
36. SDC propose a new partnership, similar to SBAC, known as the Safer Somerset Business Partnership (“SSBP”). SSBP will be a multi-agency crime reduction partnership including TDBC, West Somerset Council (“WSC”), SDC, the Police, PCC and local businesses that wish to participate by way of subscription. It is anticipated the scheme will go live on the 1st of April 2019.
37. SSBP includes Database & Intranet for Safer Communities (“DISC”). DISC is an electronic application based on information sharing. It contains the facility to submit intelligence and incident reports. Reporting will be undertaken by subscribers of the system, businesses namely, and will cost each subscriber £100 plus VAT per annum. No information was presented to the group to qualify or quantify reduced rates of crime or anti-social behaviour and/or increased enforcement by the employment of DISC.
38. All ideas to alleviate the problems of crime and anti-social behaviour must be considered. It is noted however that SSBP will in large measure replicate the work of SBAC, previously undertaken without significant cost to the taxpayer. The group are concerned that SSBP and DISC will become another reporting mechanism, without actually providing increased levels of resource leading to enforcement and arrest. The group believe that additional resource will be better directed on increasing Police numbers and apprehending offenders.
39. A new Business Improvement District (“BID”) initiative is proposed to assist

tackle crime and anti-social behaviour issues. BID will not ensue until at least twelve months hence and is subject to majority agreement by way of vote of business rates payers. BID could provide benefits, but the group are concerned that significant costs will be expended on the administration of BID, at the consequence of funding additional front-line services.

40. It is evident that the perception of crime and anti-social behaviour is a problem. Considering the above conclusions, it is unsurprising that public satisfaction with tackling crime and anti-social behaviour is low. The group are disappointed that the only response by TDBC and the Police to reduce crime and anti-social behaviour, or the perception thereof, was an acceptance that the present system is not delivering and “could be better”.
41. The group consider that problems caused by crime and anti-social behaviour will continue until the responsible public bodies apply the appropriate resources, skillset and strategy.

Recommendations

The group advise the following:

1. Robust representations by TDBC to the Police requesting senior leadership and a focus on crime and anti-social behaviour in Taunton’s town centre. **Urgent** priority must be given to reducing drug related crime and theft.
2. TDBC’s Chief Executive Officer (“CEO”) to make **immediate** robust representations to the Police and PCC for increased Police resources within Taunton Deane.
3. TDBC to:
 - a. Strongly consider reassignment of TDBC officers presently tasked with anti-social behaviour and rough sleeping matters to ensure a fit for purpose skillset;
 - b. Appoint a specialist anti-social behaviour co-ordinator, who must be a former senior police officer suggested to be the rank not less than Superintendent, to champion TDBC’s anti-social behaviour and rough sleeping policy. A former junior police officer, although likely to be competent, is unlikely to hold the required management background required to advocate on behalf of TDBC at the expected level to senior Police officers and/or the PCC; and
 - c. Until the appointment of a specialist anti-social behaviour officer is appointed, as per 2(b) above, TDBC’s CEO be charged as TDBC’s senior responsible officer on the council’s anti-social behaviour and rough sleeping strategy and operations.
4. TDBC request the Police take ownership on leading ‘one team’ partnership working. If the Police fail to undertake such, TDBC to own the role.

5. Within two months of this report the 'one team' partnership and TDBC are to instigate meaningful priorities for Taunton. This will include a costed strategy and ensure the partnership is accountable by way of meaningful and deliverable outcomes to include:
 - a. Reducing crime;
 - b. Preventing and tackling anti-social behaviour;
 - c. Making the public and businesses feeling safer;
 - d. Reducing the harm caused by drugs and alcohol and mental health issues;
 - e. Reducing adult re-offending;
 - f. Preventing offending by children and young people; and
 - g. Developing community cohesion against crime and anti-social behaviour.

This should be undertaken by way of eight strategic themes:

- a. Intervention by law enforcement;
 - b. Prevention by communicating Taunton's robust approach to address crime and anti-social behaviour;
 - c. Non-negotiable support for those identified as perpetrators of crime and anti-social behaviour;
 - d. Robust enforcement to protect the community, victims and witnesses as well as punishing offenders for their actions whilst deterring others from committing crime and anti-social behaviour;
 - e. Victim support;
 - f. Encouragement of the reporting of crime and anti-social behaviour to the Police, as without the reporting the true problem will remain masked;
 - g. Information sharing to deliver effective enforcement action against crime and anti-social behaviour; and
 - h. Public reassurance and community empowerment by way of engagement to foster confidence and the probability that perpetrators will be brought to justice.
6. The 'one team' partnership must seek early funding to reinstate the regular drug testing regime by the Somerset Drugs and Alcohol Service ("SDAS").
7. Musgrove Park Hospital ("MPH") and the South Western Ambulance Service ("SWAS") must be invited to become full participants of the 'one team' partnership.
8. As it is unlikely Police resources will be forthcoming in the short-term, with immediate effect TDBC must provide permanent funding for Taunton town centre street wardens. This amounts £113,880, to be provided by TDBC's General Fund Reserves, to enable a twelve-month full-time street warden service for:
 - a. Weekdays – between 0700hrs and 1800hrs;
 - b. Saturdays – between 0800hrs and 1800hrs; and

c. Sundays – 0900hrs and 1700hrs.

TDBC general fund reserves presently stand at £2.088 million – a balance above the recommended minimum reserves level approved in TDBC’s budget strategy of £1.7 million.

9. TDBC is not to renew the CCTV contract until discussions take place with SDC on an appropriate service level agreement, costs, and value for money. It is expected that meaningful proposals be concluded within three months of this report, with TDBC’s CEO leading TDBC’s negotiations. Until that date the present contract will continue.
10. Terms of the new CCTV contract is to include a CCTV operator with dedicated supervision of CCTV cameras operating within Taunton Deane.
11. In the event that SDC are unable to offer a contract to meet TDBC’s requirements, TDBC is to service CCTV operations and associated radio link inhouse. At this point the nature of partnership working *per se* will require revisiting as the reliance on outsourcing will have been deemed defective.
12. Updates on crime, anti-social behaviour, rough sleeping and the delivery of CCTV is to be brought before TDBC scrutiny at regular intervals. An annual report on each, together with incident reporting, is also to be published.
13. The Public Space Protection Order (“PSPO”) must be renewed by TDBC in September 2019. It is expected that TDBC utilise prohibition notices independently and in conjunction with the Police.
14. TDBC shall support BID, subject to the demands of the business community and any levy not being employed on additional administrative roles.
15. TDBC to publicly provide contact details of its cleansing administrators so litter from rough sleeping and/or drug usage can be reported and cleansed.
16. TDBC to work with the third sector to address and resolve issues emanating from Linley House and other temporary housing shelters. This must take a robust approach and accept the principle that criminal and anti-social behaviour will lead to eviction from sheltered housing and possible processing by other agencies.
17. TDBC to encourage the alternative giving scheme, which permits public donations to the third sector.
18. TDBC to appoint a councillor as a member champion on crime and anti-social issues. Creation of a role to assist, and lead where appropriate, on related council strategy and matters.

References

- Appendix A – Original Motion to TDBC dated the 2nd October 2018
- Appendix B – Spotlight Review Terms of Reference
- Appendix C – Spotlight Review Agenda - 19th February 2019
- Appendix D – CCTV Questions
- Appendix E – Submissions

IAN MORRELL
Chairman
13th March 2019