



House of Commons  
Home Affairs Committee

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**Home Office  
preparedness for  
Covid-19 (coronavirus):  
policing: Government  
Response to the  
Committee's First  
Report**

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**Third Special Report of Session  
2019–21**

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

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## Home Affairs Committee

The Home Affairs Committee is appointed by the House of Commons to examine the expenditure, administration, and policy of the Home Office and its associated public bodies.

### Current membership

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### Committee staff

The current staff of the Committee are Simon Armitage (Committee Specialist), Melissa Bailey (Committee Assistant), Chris Battersby (Committee Specialist), 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).

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You can follow the Committee on Twitter using [@CommonsHomeAffs](https://twitter.com/CommonsHomeAffs).



## Third Special Report

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On 17 April 2020 the Home Affairs Committee published its First Report of Session 2019–21, [Home Office preparedness for COVID-19 \(Coronavirus\): Policing](#) (HC 232). The Government's response was received on 20 July 2020 and is appended to this report.

In the Government's Response the Committee's recommendations are shown in **bold** type, and the Government's responses are shown in plain type.

## Appendix: Government Response

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### Introduction

The police are playing a vital role in keeping us all safe from the impacts of the COVID-19 pandemic. The pace at which this national health emergency has developed meant it was important for us to move quickly to give the police the powers and guidance they need to continue keeping the public safe. That is why, on 10 February we introduced regulations to give health professionals the power to detain patients with Covid-19 for the specific purposes of screening and assessment, or to isolate them for a period of time. These were then followed by further regulations introduced on 26 March in England, Wales, and Scotland, and shortly after on 28 March in Northern Ireland, to slow the spread of COVID-19. These regulations gave the police powers to enforce the measures required to protect the public and keep people safe during the pandemic.

Throughout this health crisis, the police have continued to uphold the long-standing British tradition of policing by consent. The police have been following the four-step escalation principle of engage, explain, encourage, with enforcement as a last resort. Under these new powers, 17,997 Fixed Penalty Notices have been issued across England and Wales between 27 March and 8 June.

The virus changed the nature of the threat we face from crime. Total crime dropped as people followed the necessary advice to stay home, however criminals have adapted, resulting in increases of certain types of crime. For example, as of 7 June 2020, there have been 2,282 COVID-19 related frauds and cybercrimes reported to Action Fraud, with over £6.2m lost in these frauds. The National Crime Agency (NCA) has taken down multiple websites running phishing scams and selling bogus Personal Protective Equipment (PPE). They have also arrested individuals suspected of trying to sell unregistered COVID-19 testing kits.

Perpetrators of sickening online child sexual abuse are seeking to exploit the fact that more young people and children are at home and online. In April, the NCA alerted the police to 1,300 potential child sexual abuse cases to help them make arrests and safeguarded children.

In April, the National Domestic Abuse Helpline reported a 120% rise in the number of calls it received in a single 24-hour period. To support the victims of domestic abuse during these times, the Home Office provided up to £2 million to enhance online support services and helplines, so that anybody who needs help and support can access it. We also announced £3 million of funding to specialist services providing support for children

affected by domestic abuse, as a continuation of the Children Affected by Domestic Abuse Fund. In addition to these, the Chancellor announced a £750 million funding package to support charities during COVID-19. £76 million of this will support survivors of domestic abuse, sexual violence and modern slavery as well as ensure that vulnerable children and young people continue to get the help they need.

Sadly, assaults on emergency workers, including the police, have increased with more than 300 prosecutions for assaults on emergency workers completed in the first month of lockdown. Assaults have ranged from individuals coughing on police officers to biting them, claiming to have COVID-19 and stating that they hoped that officers would “die of Corona”. Any attack, including spitting and coughing, on our emergency workers who are putting themselves on the frontline against COVID-19 is completely unacceptable.

The Crown Prosecution Service (CPS) has made it clear that such attacks could be charged as common assault. Anyone found guilty of spitting, coughing, or threatening to infect our police officers will face the full force of the law.

We have ensured that police officers are protected when doing their crucial work. We have worked closely with the National Police Co-ordination Centre (NPoCC) who have co-ordinating police PPE procurement and distribution across the whole country, with police forces sharing PPE when necessary. Throughout the pandemic NPoCC has confirmed that police have had a good supply of PPE and they have been working to oversee its distribution to forces. NPoCC distributes hundreds of thousands of masks per fortnight to support police forces. Tens of millions of pieces have been procured and continue to be delivered to forces across the country. Testing has been made available to all police officers and members of their household. This has enabled officers to determine if they should remain isolated to protect others or if they can safely return to the workplace, this has been vital to our frontline resilience and the wellbeing of our police officers.

Police forces remain focussed on the immediate task of keeping the public safe but are simultaneously planning for the new normal as we move further into recovery. The Home Office is working closely with policing to anticipate the challenges of this progression—but also to consider the opportunities. Over the past few months, police forces across England and Wales have developed innovative solutions to ensure forces continue to have the right number of officers. The College of Policing has worked at speed to provide an online solution to assessing candidates. This process will significantly reduce the need for face to face contact, without compromising on the quality of candidates, meaning we can remain on track to recruiting an additional 6,000 officers by March 2021 and reach our target of recruiting 20,000 officers over the next 3 years. We will work together to identify these good practice and opportunities for improvement so that, when the threat from Covid-19 recedes, we can further strengthen policing.

Our police forces face unique challenges and are doing an excellent job in such extraordinary circumstances. We are thankful for their dedication to public service during this crisis and we remain committed to supporting them.

Along with policing colleagues, we have carefully considered the Committee's observations, conclusions and recommendations. It is worth noting that, due to the rapid pace at which

the pandemic and the Government's response have evolved, many of the issues raised in the report have progressed or become less of a focus for those delivering policing to our communities.

**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).

We agree with the committee that clarity in these circumstances is essential. Due in part to the speed at which changes have had to be introduced, some inconsistencies did arise. Where this was the case, we worked with the police and other government departments to resolve the issues swiftly. We will continue to work closely with key policing bodies to ensure frontline officers have clarity on the law and their associated enforcement powers, including where appropriate through up to date operational guidance.

There have been cases where guidance has purposely been stricter than what was in law. For example, the 2-metre distancing rule was not enshrined in legislation as it would have been extremely difficult to police. However, this social distancing measure was essential for the public's health and safety, which is why it was encouraged in Government messaging. Police across the country used their community-facing role to remind members of the public of the guidance as appropriate.

**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).

The NPCC has committed to providing data related to enforcement through the new FPN offences on a fortnightly basis. The first of these updates was provided on 15 April and continues to be published every two weeks. Guidance is continuously reviewed with support from the Home Office. Due to the frequency and pace at which the regulations are updated, we would direct the committee to the College of Policing's webpages which contain regular updates and details of the latest guidance available.

**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 Government recognises the importance of parks and other green spaces remaining open to the public during the COVID-19 pandemic to assist with wellbeing. The decision to close parks rests with local authorities. On 18 April, the Communities Secretary called for more parks to be reopened to the public while ensuring people continue to observe social distancing guidelines. In the subsequent week, more than 340 parks and green spaces reopened across the country.

Following scientific advice, parks, Areas of Outstanding Natural Beauty and national parks are open for the public to enjoy in a safe and responsible manner while following social distancing guidance. The police continue to have the powers available to disperse individuals and issue FPNs to those breaking the rules if necessary, as outlined in the Regulations.

**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).

Over the COVID-19 period, forces have continued to investigate fraud cases and engage constructively with the Government and other agencies. Where there is the potential threat to life (as with some instances of fake COVID-19 testing kits or fake COVID-19 PPE), we have seen forces acting extremely rapidly to intervene to help safeguard victims.

Reports received by Action Fraud are considered by the National Fraud Intelligence Bureau (NFIB), both of which are operated by the City of London Police (as the national lead force for fraud) and are evaluated to assess the information available which could assist an investigation, and to identify links between seemingly unconnected incidents. Where there is enough evidence available and a viable lead, actionable intelligence packages are created and sent to the appropriate police force to consider whether enforcement activity should take place. It is up to forces to make operational decisions about which intelligence packages they pursue or not, depending on their capacity. It is important to clarify that Action Fraud is not responsible for investigating fraud.

Although there has been considerable media coverage and social media sharing of fraud and scam content, we have not seen comparable increases in reported victim numbers. As a result (and whilst fraud reports have started to return to more normal pre-COVID-19 levels)—it would not be accurate to say that Action Fraud has seen significant increases in reports of fraud.

As of 7 June 2020, there have been 2,282 COVID-19 related frauds and cybercrimes reported to Action Fraud, with over £6.2m lost in these frauds. COVID-19 related fraud makes up around 2% of all fraud reports received to Action Fraud within the week preceding 7 June 2020.

There is a possibility that the public may have simply decided not to report their frauds. We hope that this is not the case and believe that the prompt action that we our agencies

and partners have taken has helped the public to spot these frauds and protect themselves. We will find out more about the overall impact of COVID-19 on fraud levels in the future, when more data - for example through the Crime Survey for England and Wales— becomes available for this time period. Beyond the immediate service offered by Action Fraud, we recognise that strategically the Action Fraud service can be better, and we are working closely with the City of London Police to address the recommendations from Sir Craig Mackey's independent review of Action Fraud and NFIB. The findings and recommendations of that review were published on 24 January: <https://www.cityoflondon.gov.uk/about-the-city/Pages/police-authority.aspx>.

The Home Office will continue to work closely with City of London Corporation, the City of London Police and the National Crime Agency to address Sir Craig Mackey's recommendations.

In addition to this, the Government commissioned a more comprehensive review of the wider Serious and Organised Crime (SOC) landscape – including fraud, also led by Sir Craig Mackey QPM. This review covered the powers, capabilities, governance and effectiveness of funding across the policing and law enforcement landscape, including the Action Fraud service. Sir Craig concluded his review in March and the Department is now considering his recommendations.

**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).

The Government takes the wellbeing of our police very seriously and appreciates all that they are doing to help keep us safe during this hugely difficult time. We understand that this will no doubt have an impact on their wellbeing and morale and are grateful for the commitment shown by the police across the country.

Every Chief Constable has a responsibility to manage and support their workforce effectively, ensuring the welfare of all officers and staff and take into account any specific needs, particularly during this challenging time. To further support for the health and wellbeing, physical protection, and families of police officers, the Government has accelerated work to introduce the Police Covenant. The Police Protection and Powers Bill will establish the Covenant on a statutory footing and ensure that Parliament has the opportunity to scrutinise progress made against it.

The Government has invested in programmes offering direct support to officers and staff, including £7.5 million to develop the National Police Wellbeing Service, which launched in 2019. The National Police Wellbeing Service provides evidence-based guidance, advice, tools and resources which can be accessed by forces and individual officers and staff. There is an emphasis on prevention, for example, by helping forces to identify mental health issues early through psychological screening, helping officers and staff to access support earlier. Furthermore, the Home Secretary and Home Office officials engage regularly with the Police Federation on many issues, including the support of police officers' mental health.

**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).**

Nationally, special constables have volunteered more hours during recent months and a number of businesses have stepped forward to offer their support by releasing their staff to volunteer as special constables. The Government has led by example by ensuring that civil servants who are already volunteering as special constables are able to assist in the national effort to the greatest extent possible for the duration of COVID-19.

For those employed elsewhere, there is a balance to strike. We must ensure that those special constables who are also part of key workforces supporting our communities through their paid employment are not taken away from those important roles at such a vital time. This is why there are no plans at present to compel employers to release special constables on full paid leave. It is currently for employers to consider where it is reasonable and possible to release special constables, should the need arise, in conjunction with the relevant force.

The Government is keen to understand how to support the special constabulary as part of the wider learning from the COVID-19 response. We will work closely with the NPCC to understand more about the sectors of employment that special constables are part of and ensure we work through the evidence to understand why some employers may not be releasing their staff and what the national need is across forces.

**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)**

On 20 March, guidance on Gov.uk was updated to make it clear that all those essential to the running of the criminal justice system are considered key workers. Getting the system fully back up and running is now a collective priority for Government, which is why we are working at pace with the Ministry of Justice on issues such as increasing jury trials. Furthermore, HM Courts and Tribunals have harnessed technology to use audio and video in 90% of our hearings, and we are using video calls and secure mobile phones to keep prisoners in touch with their families and to maintain order.

**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).**

Testing has been available to all symptomatic police officers and their families since 17 April 2020. This has enabled officers to determine if they should remain isolated or can return to the workplace. This has been vital to frontline resilience. Absence levels

in the police have remained consistently low. As of 10 June, absences are at 6.7% of the national establishment. This is well below thresholds of concern, but rates are continually monitored.

The NPoCC no longer records the number of police officers who have been tested as they have no concerns relating to officers' access to testing. At the last count on 26 May, 2,808 police officers had been tested. Any officers tested up to the end of April were included in the government target of 100,000 tests per day.

The police have been closely engaged through this process, and feedback from forces on access to Department of Health and Social Care (DHSC) testing has been very positive. The police demand has been fully met by DHSC national testing centres and therefore there has been no need to prioritise any particular police roles or forces in the roll out of national testing.

**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).

The Government and devolved administrations fully accept that it is vital police officers are clear about the use of PPE in order to keep themselves and the public they serve safe. The Government and devolved administrations last published guidance on appropriate PPE on 21 May. This continues to be reviewed by all four UK public health bodies and informed by NHS infection prevention control experts. This guidance is consistent with World Health Organization (WHO) guidance for protecting health and social care workers from COVID-19. The guidance published by the NPCC for police officers across the whole of the UK is fully in line with the latest guidance published by the Government and devolved administrations.

The Home Office worked closely with the NPCC, the College of Policing, and the Police Federation to ensure that changes to the guidance were understood by police officers. The published guidance includes scenarios where officers should wear medical grade PPE and also where this is not required. The guidance confirms that social distancing and enhanced hygiene measures remain the most effective ways of avoiding transmission of COVID-19.

Ministers and officials have regular conversations with forces and Police and Crime Commissioners about a range of matters including the supply of PPE. In addition, the Home Office has been in regular contact with the National Police Coordination Centre (NPoCC), which oversees the distribution of PPE to forces. NPoCC continues to provide the Home Office with regular updates on stock levels of PPE providing both a national and Force level summary of supplies.

**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).

Reports of people coughing and spitting at police officers are appalling. The use of spit and bite guards, as with any other use of restraint or force, is an operational policing matter. It is therefore a decision for individual Chief Officers as to whether they make spit and bite guards available for use by officers. All 43 Home Office police forces are currently using spit and bite guards.

The Crown Prosecution Service has swiftly prosecuted those who cough or spit at police officers and will continue to do so. For example, the Crown Prosecution Service has successfully prosecuted several individuals for common assault only a few days after they spat at police officers and claimed to have COVID-19.

**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)

The supply of PPE is an operational matter. The Home Office continues to work extremely closely with the police to ensure they receive the equipment they need, when they need it, in order to carry out their jobs safely. The NPCC have confirmed that police currently have a good supply of PPE and they are working to oversee its distribution to forces. Between 15 May and 12 June, the NPCC have distributed over 400,000 masks to police forces across the country and over 15 million pieces of PPE have been procured for use by the police.