

Home Secretary at the Police Federation conference 2021

Thank you and good morning.

And John thank you as well for your speech. I have to say that I'm so pleased to be here today and to finally have the opportunity to address this conference with you all today.

I also, John, really value the regular conversations that we have about policing. Of course at times they are challenging, but the fact is they are immensely useful.

And of course for all the members here I really wish it were possible to be with you all in person, but nonetheless it is an enormous privilege to be addressing the Police Federation Annual Conference.

Now it's a fact that I have a wide range of responsibilities as Home Secretary, but there is nothing I take more seriously than my duty to the police.

Nothing gives me greater pride than the work I've been able to do with men and women in policing, who do an extraordinary job under increasingly extraordinary circumstances.

And nothing has a stronger effect on me than talking to the families of police officers who have been killed in the line of duty.

I expect you had a variety of reasons for wanting to join the police – and the most popular reason was the desire to serve and protect the public.

I bet none of you thought, "I think I'll be a police officer. It looks really easy."

John and I have a shared duty: being an advocate for the police.

And I am your political advocate in Westminster. It's my job to make sure you have what you need to do your job.

We are increasing the powers available to you with the Police, Crime, Sentencing and Courts Bill and with the planned increase as you've heard of 20,000 new officers. We've already recruited 8,771 more officers.

And I advocate on your behalf to the British people.

The overwhelming majority of them are right behind you. Backing the police is what a Government who is delivering on the People's Priorities does.

But it's my job to remind the public about the amazing work you all do, as well as the intense pressures you face, and the sacrifices you make.

I could not hope to understand the police if I only read briefing notes and followed media reports.

That's why I routinely join the police on patrol, attend raids, visit stations and operational centres, and spend as much time as possible talking with officers of every rank.

It's also vital that I do it, so that I can fully understand what it's like for you and what you need.

The thing about heroes is that they really don't think of themselves as heroic.

But I know that heroes walk amongst us because I have met them.

An officer stabbed while on duty.

Another officer who wrestled the Reading terrorist to the ground.

Recruits who were beaming with excitement about joining up, even though they knew the difficulties and dangers that they would face.

It is both deeply humbling and hugely reassuring.

And I listen very carefully to the Police Federation.

On vaccinating officers, as John has spoken, the Government accepted the advice of the independent Joint Committee on Vaccinations and Immunisations to prioritise vaccines by age and clinical vulnerability, as the risk of serious health problems from COVID is highest for them.

The Joint Committee advised that this would be the most effective and quickest way to reduce deaths and hospitalisations.

In addition to maintaining order and fighting crime, police officers have a duty to protect life. It means having the courage to make tough decisions about risk day in, day out, and having to account for those decisions. Now the pandemic caused us to have to do the same – not just on the restrictions imposed, but also on the vaccination roll-out.

It meant recognising that to save lives we absolutely had to prioritise the vaccine rollout in line with the overriding risk factors of age and clinical vulnerability.

Now of course the Federation has represented police officers for more than a century. And I am delighted that this will soon include Special Constables.

You tell politicians what it's like on the front line and what needs to change.

And there's no doubt you have my support. That is a guarantee.

And I also know that your faith in your Home Secretary is earned, and under constant review.

And that is the same of course and is true of your loved ones, who also make enormous sacrifices.

Now with that of course while I will keep singing your praises and stating my commitment to you, I also know that listening to your voices is incredibly important.

So let me give you some hard facts, some hard evidence as to how I have listened.

The emergence of a deadly virus meant that the country had to lock down. And yet you could not do that. You had to leave your homes to keep everyone else safe.

And you did not flinch. You went out there, enforced the law, provided reassurance, and saved lives.

We had to introduce new laws and restrictions that nobody in this country had ever seen before.

If they had been poorly enforced, we could have seen panic, chaos, or even worse.

Fortunately, our country has the best police force in the world.

I was impressed when I joined the Met on Op Prima patrols, watched frontline officers using the four Es – engaging, explaining, encouraging, and enforcing – to keep the public safe.

Likewise, I heard from officers at a custody suite in Acton about the additional pressures brought by COVID.

And then with help from the National Crime Agency and Regional Organised Crime Units, law enforcement has cracked down on the organised criminal networks that have sought to exploit the opportunities that the pandemic has presented.

The Home Office has made over £200 million of COVID-related funding available to policing. This included £32 million of additional funding for enforcement and over £170 million available for reimbursement of COVID costs and COVID pressures.

On behalf of the whole country, thank you for still being there for us during one of the toughest moments in our country's history. You have all done it superbly well and courageously.

It is a cruel irony, though, that while most crimes naturally fell during lockdown, violence and abuse directed at police officers increased.

You were spat and coughed at by thugs claiming to have the virus.

Some of you were seriously injured and your vans were set on fire during the despicable events in Bristol earlier this year.

Police were bloodied and pelted with bottles in Hyde Park in April.

The year from December 2019 to December 2020, we saw a big increase in assaults on police officers. Assaults on constables without injury increased by 21 per cent to 25,156. Assaults on constables with injury went up by 2 per cent, but that is over 11,000 cases.

These figures are shocking.

This behaviour is grotesque. And I will never accept that it's simply part of the job.

It is an attack on the fabric of our society. And every police uniform is worn by a human being who is entitled to dignity and respect.

The right to protest and speak freely does not include the right to smash up property, or abuse police officers.

And I will not let the police be subject to trial by social media.

That's why I backed the Federation's call for forces to share body-worn video footage to counter highly selective, and misleading, video clips uploaded onto social media.

I want forces to be more proactive in sharing body worn video footage to highlight the fantastic work of their officers, to build public confidence, and to correct harmful misinformation circulating online.

It is critical that we work as a system to ensure that we maintain public confidence in policing, which is vital for victim reporting, intelligence-led policing, and to maintain our treasured model of policing by consent.

As part of this process, we will be looking carefully at strengthening the system of local community scrutiny and the value of body-worn video, because transparency is vital.

And while police forces are also more representative than ever of the communities they serve, I want to see even more progress.

I will condemn the abuse of police officers wherever I see it happen.

But I will also act.

And I have acted.

We are doubling the maximum prison sentence for common assault or battery against emergency workers from twelve months to two years. For even more serious assaults such as ABH and GBH, higher maximum penalties already exist.

But I will continue to do everything in my power to ensure assaults on our police are treated with the appropriate severity across the whole criminal justice system.

Those who have contempt for the police may be louder and more vitriolic than

ever, but they are vastly outnumbered and utterly wrong.

Far from feeling any shame in being a police officer, you all should feel very proud indeed.

We have also acted in response to what you said about the tools and powers you need.

Now one of my first acts as Home Secretary was to make available a £10 million funding pot to enable Chief Constables to equip every single officer with a Taser, should they wish to do so. I also approved the faster Taser 7 for England and Wales.

Senior officers have also been crystal clear that stop and search is crucial in the fight against crime. We have empowered 8,500 more officers to use stop and search powers by relaxing voluntary restrictions on Section 60.

We have gathered the views of police officers and community scrutiny leads on the Section 60 relaxations and their operational effect. I will announce a decision on the pilot shortly.

Legislation currently before Parliament will introduce Serious Violence Reduction Orders – targeted stop and search powers to deter known knife carriers – which will give the police the authority to stop and search known knife and weapons carriers.

In July, we will start the Knife Crime Prevention Order pilot in London. These have been requested by the police as a vital means of diverting people away from crime. Now these Knife Crime Prevention Orders will address key life factors that may increase the chances of offending or reoffending, alongside measures to prohibit certain activities, or introduce geographical restrictions and curfews.

Since November 2019, we have invested £65 million – including £40 million this year alone – in shutting down county lines and cutting off the supply of drugs.

Now thanks to your tremendous efforts, it has exceeded expectations, with more than 780 lines closed, over 5,100 arrests, nearly £3 million in cash and significant quantities of drugs seized, and more than 1,200 vulnerable people safeguarded.

Our focus is on areas which are the source of most county lines, but we are supporting you through the National County Lines Coordination Centre.

And this year, for the first time, we have established a dedicated fund to help local police forces tackle the scourge of county lines.

Now you said you needed more police officers.

As soon as I became Home Secretary, I launched an unprecedented recruitment campaign.

And we are ahead of schedule. Already, there are an additional 8,771 officers in England and Wales.

John, you have asked and pressed me about the age and training of these recruits.

That's why I have provided the College with more than £1 million to kick-start the development of a new National Police Leadership Centre.

It will focus on sergeants and equivalent supervisors first before expanding to all ranks.

Meanwhile, we are working hard on retaining experienced officers, seeking to understand who is leaving and why, so we can support forces in intervening to keep our talented officers with vital skills.

You asked for more funding, and we have delivered.

We are increasing police funding by up to an additional £600 million this year to recruit new officers. And I am delighted with the superb progress forces have made on recruitment.

This year, the Government is investing more than £130 million in fighting serious violent crime, including knife crime and murder.

That includes £30 million to help the police target the parts of England and Wales most hit by serious violence.

This is additional to more than £100 million in surge funding given to the police over the last two years to increase operational capacity and resources.

We all know that increased patrols, weapons sweeps, and stop and search work.

You do amazing work with young people. That is why the £130 million includes £35.5 million to develop Violence Reduction Units and £20 million for early interventions.

Now I am very proud of the work that we are doing in introducing the Police Covenant.

Police officers, staff, and volunteers perform a unique and crucial role. Quite frankly, you have been waiting for far too long for this to be recognised in law.

The Police Covenant represents our promise – to you and your families – that we will do everything we can to support you and honour your service.

The Covenant will be enshrined in law through the Police, Crime, Sentencing and Courts Bill, and the Home Secretary will report annually to Parliament on the work undertaken.

The Front Line Review and the Police Federation are both very clear that you

need more support for dealing with the pressures of the job.

The National Police Wellbeing Survey will mean existing and former members of the police service continue to get health and wellbeing support and physical protection – and that their families are supported as well.

The Covenant will include a focus on occupational health standards in police forces and mental health training for officers before they deploy.

And we will look at options for appointing a new Chief Medical Officer for Policing in England and Wales.

The new Bill represents a major milestone in law and order. It will restore public confidence in the criminal justice system, give the police and courts the tools they need, you need to cut crime, and protect the police and other emergency workers.

One of the many difficult parts of your job is driving in high-pressure situations – chasing suspects and responding urgently and pressing incidents.

The Police Federation said that it wasn't fair for officers involved in a collision to be judged in comparison with a regular member of the public.

We listened.

There will be new tests to assess the standard of driving of police officers. And the courts will judge officers against a competent peer with the same training, so that the officer's skills and training can be taken into account when deciding whether their driving was careless or dangerous.

The Bill also contains measures that will allow the police to take a much more proactive approach to managing highly disruptive protests.

The conditions that the police can impose on static protests will match those for marches. The circumstances for conditions will broaden to prevent serious disruption. Maximum penalties for a breach will increase and we will restate in statute the common law offence of public nuisance.

The Officer and Staff Safety Review was an essential piece of work that will help to reduce the risk of assault, injury, and death.

The whole country is shaken whenever a police officer is killed. Of course, the loss is felt even more intensely by fellow officers.

I wholeheartedly endorse John's tribute to everyone who has fallen or lost their life to COVID since the last time this conference met.

I have met PC Andrew Harper's widow Lissie and his mother Debbie. Now these were terribly moving experiences – as was his funeral.

As you know, Harper's Law is a campaign for tougher sentences for people who kill emergency workers. And the Police Federation has spoken to me about widespread unhappiness about the leniency and inconsistent application of

sentences.

I share that unhappiness.

Officials from my department have joined officials from the Ministry of Justice in several meetings with Lissie and Andy Fiddler, from Thames Valley Police Federation.

The Ministry of Justice is reviewing the current law and considering what a new offence could look like. I want you to know that I take this extremely seriously.

Now one of the first questions any police officer has for the Home Secretary is, "Are you going to let me do the job I signed up for?"

Now the answer is yes, absolutely.

I want you to have the personal and professional satisfaction of catching criminals, cutting crime, and keeping communities safe.

And that's what the public wants. It is one of the People's Priorities.

Our new National Crime and Policing Measures are designed to provide national accountability and collective responsibility, so that communities can feel and see the benefit of the increased officer numbers on our streets and experienced officers are trusted to get on with the job. These measures are:

- reduce murder and other homicide;
- reduce serious violence;
- disrupt drugs supply and county lines;
- reduce neighbourhood crime;
- tackle cyber crime; and
- improve satisfaction amongst victims, with a particular focus on victims of domestic abuse.

This isn't about red tape. This is not a return to targets.

It's not about interfering with the democratic accountability of PCCs, local police and crime plans, or with the operational independence of Chief Constables.

It's about empowering you to do your job. Cut crime.

These are the People's Priorities.

The police are central to everything we do.

This country has endured an incredible shock, the likes of which none of us has experienced before and you have played a heroic role in bringing us through. As we come out of coronavirus, we must cut crime and build back safer – and we can't do it without you.

Without you, we would not have dealt so many recent blows to serious and organised crime, including Operation Venetic – the UK's biggest ever law enforcement operation.

Without you, our drive to dismantle county lines drugs gangs would not have yielded such incredible results.

Without you, thousands of weapons would not have been taken off our streets, as we crack down on serious violence.

Without you, we could not combat terrorism.

Without you, more young people would make bad choices and ruin lives, including their own.

Without you, the public would not feel safe.

Without you, criminals would run riot and this country would fall apart.

Our country depends on you.

And I have got your backs.