

Home Affairs Committee

Oral evidence: [Serious violence](#), HC 1016

Tuesday 12 March 2019

Ordered by the House of Commons to be published on 12 March 2019.

[Watch the meeting](#)

Members present: Yvette Cooper (Chair); Kate Green; Tim Loughton; Stuart C. McDonald; John Woodcock.

Questions 149–178

Witness

I: Chief Constable Sara Thornton, Chair, National Police Chiefs' Council

Written evidence from witnesses:

- [National Police Chiefs' Council](#)

Examination of witness

Chief Constable Sara Thornton, Chair, National Police Chiefs' Council

Q149 **Chair:** Welcome, Chief Constable Sara Thornton. Thank you very much for joining us this morning. I want to begin by asking about serious and violent crime as part of our serious and violent crime inquiry, and particularly about what is happening at the moment on knife crime. Can you tell us what the conclusions were of the summit with the Home Secretary?

Chief Constable Thornton: About three or four months ago chief constables from the seven forces that were most affected had a meeting with the Home Secretary. Since then we have meetings together to share good practice and working with officials. Last week's meeting was the second meeting in the series. We wanted to talk to him about several things, first the issue of what we need to do now to suppress the violence. Chiefs are of the view that we know what tactics work, whether that is patrolling of the hotspot areas where the high-harm offences are happening, whether it is about the use of stop and search—whether that is Section 60 or Section 1—whether that is about concerted action on county lines on targeting organised crime groups.

We have been sharing good practice and sharing our ideas across the forces about what works, but our concern was the fact that although we know what works, we do not currently have the capacity. You have heard me speak to this Committee before, and colleagues have, about the general strain that policing is under. Although we appreciate that for 2019-20 there is more money going to go into the system, of course you will appreciate it takes quite a while to turn that money into feet on the street, at least six months would be the estimate of my colleagues. We were saying to the Home Secretary we need some additional support now to suppress the violence now. He was very much listening to that and we have been doing some work since then to say what would it look like to have some money now to suppress the violence.

The second thing that we were very keen to say to him is that of course we completely agree that the causes and the drivers of serious violence are many and complex and that policing is not the solution. Many of my colleagues use the phrase that we cannot arrest our way out of the problem and I would agree with that. So we wanted to talk about what was the contribution of other institutions and other organisations. We talked about the need for more work in terms of prevention.

Everybody talks about the public health model—the idea that you do not just treat the disease, but try to prevent it from occurring in the first place. We think that model has a lot to recommend it. In London the



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Mayor's Office is setting up a violence reduction unit and there is work happening on that in Birmingham. There is a need, we think, to spread that much more widely across the country in terms of that local activity.

We also suggested to the Home Secretary that officials should come out and spend some time on the ground, trying to see how local partnerships are working, because frequently they need a lot of drive and a lot of push and they are struggling. There are pockets of good practice. The Violence Alliance, for example, in the West Midlands is a good approach and it is doing more work in the hospitals when people are being brought in with assault injuries. But we felt that whole focus on prevention needed help both locally but also at a national level.

What do we mean by that? There are certain key areas where we think other institutions and other Departments need to be pulled around the table. I said as if it were an emergency, but how do we pool all our contributions to solve this problem and that sense of urgency? One of the debates, as you know, was about the vulnerability of children, particularly those who were excluded or who were off-rolled or maybe who are in care or who maybe are homeless and how we need to get concerted action on those sorts of problems, bringing people around the table at a national level. We feel very strongly that that is a role for Government to co-ordinate and push that. Those were the main points that we made to the Home Secretary. I have not seen a note of the meeting, but I would say he was very much listening.

The other thing that is worth saying at this stage is that the Serious Violence Strategy was published a year ago. If you read it, it is a really good strategy in terms of an understanding of the drivers of serious violence, but also thinking about what can we do in terms of organised crime in county lines, what can we do in terms of community and local intervention, what can we do about early intervention and also of course what can we do about law enforcement and criminal justice. Our concern is that it needs driving strongly and it also needs more co-ordinated and concerted resources behind it.

Q150 Chair: I am going on to ask a bit more about the need for drive and how you deliver that kind of drive and focus, but you were saying at the beginning about your list of the things that you know work. In terms of dealing with the policing, the immediate reduction of violence or suppressing violence on the streets at the moment, could you list all of the things that your chief constables think are the key things that work?

Chief Constable Thornton: The first one would be the targeting of patrol in those crime hotspots, highly-visible policing. If you ask the Met officers how they are doing it, it is based on the latest information, tasked on a daily basis from Lambeth, getting officers into the right areas to those high-harm locations. That is exactly what my colleague, Dave Thompson, did in Birmingham last week after those three awful murders, getting officers from his neighbourhood teams and from all his operational units into the centre of Birmingham using Section 60s. The



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sorts of weaponry that he was seizing, or his officers were, was quite staggering and worrying.

Q151 **Chair:** That was doing Section 60 stop and searches?

Chief Constable Thornton: Yes. You are aware that there are two main powers we use to stop and search. The first one is Section 1, where we have to have reasonable grounds that the article is carried. The other power is the Section 60 power, which allows a senior officer to authorise searching without reasonable grounds in a particular area for a set amount of time if they think that violence is going to happen.

Chair: Sorry, I did not want to interrupt your list.

Chief Constable Thornton: That is what they were doing in Birmingham and that is what they have been doing in London a lot in the last year. Cressida would say maybe a couple of years ago they were doing fewer than 10 a year; I think it was 300 last year. It is a real scaling-up. Of course the power is there, but you need the officers and you need the capacity to use that power. That is the first thing.

The second thing is that stop and search has changed enormously because officers who are stopping and searching are using the body-worn cameras. I am not saying for one minute that people are not concerned about the use of the power. I have always said it needs to be used fairly and with respect, but I think the fact that a lot of these searches now are recorded on the body-worn camera makes a huge amount of difference. My understanding is it has led to a reduction in complaints and assaults, so that is really good.

The other thing that we think is important is the focus on organised crime groups and the gangs, disrupting those gangs, working with the National Crime Agency, working in support of the county lines co-ordination unit that was set up last year. We have been doing concerted enforcement around county lines. For example, in the last week-long enforcement, 650 children were safeguarded and protected, so there is a range of things operationally.

Chair, can I again emphasise we do not think that policing is the only solution, but we do think that when the violence is getting to the stages it is that we need that immediate ability to suppress now?

Q152 **Chair:** To clarify in terms of the policing expertise, on that immediate suppression, are there any other things in your list of the immediate things that work from the policing point of view?

Chief Constable Thornton: Those are the main things.

Q153 **Chair:** Thank you very much. On the co-ordination and the leadership and the focus—put aside the resources issue for a second—I am interested in what more you think the Serious Violence Strategy needs to have enough energy in it or enough co-ordination in it.



Chief Constable Thornton: I have said this to the Home Secretary on several occasions. We feel that somebody at the very top of Government needs to be driving the contributions to that strategy. Early intervention is not really a matter for the Home Office. A lot of the community work similarly is not a matter for the Home Office. We think there needs to be something that is concentrating the minds. As I said, it need not be Cobra, Cobra is just a room, but getting the most senior people around the table and owning the problem and asking what can we do jointly to solve the problem.

One of the examples, to my mind, where it was clear that we had not done enough of that was that debate last week about school exclusions. I do not think my colleagues or indeed the police and crime commissioners and the Mayor were in any way blaming head teachers for making those difficult decisions. What they were saying is that if the number of children excluded or being off-rolled are going up, what is the provision for those highly vulnerable children? We do know that they are very often the sorts of vulnerable children who the gangs look to recruit into their endeavours.

Q154 **Chair:** Have you been to any national meetings co-ordinated by the Government that have involved Education and Health and Housing and local government at them?

Chief Constable Thornton: I have not personally. A year ago the previous Home Secretary set up the Violent Crime Taskforce. A couple of police chiefs go and I think there is a junior Minister from Education, but I have not been to the meeting so I am not entirely certain. I looked for minutes in preparation for appearing before you and I cannot find them. Certainly I do not think they are available openly.

Q155 **Chair:** That says quite a lot anyway. If you are the chief of the NPCC and the minutes are not routinely being sent—the minutes or announcements or purpose and so on—from the violence taskforce, that sounds like that is a problem.

Chief Constable Thornton: When we first met with the Home Secretary last year, I and other colleagues made that point, that it needs to be much more tasky, leaning in, forward-leaning. The taskforce I think probably is rather London-centric. There are London Members of Parliament and the London Mayor sitting on it, but there are not the equivalent for the rest of the country. Cressida goes to it and she says it is a good meeting and the Home Secretary clearly prioritises it, but I think we need to step up a stage beyond that to task and focus and problem-solve. That has been our position.

To be fair as well, the reason why the Home Secretary met with the chiefs last November and why we have been working with officials since is because there is a recognition that we need to maybe join up the operational with some of that important work that was being done in Government.



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Q156 **Chair:** Do you know how often the Serious Violence Taskforce has met?

Chief Constable Thornton: I would be guessing; I think it is three or four times, but somebody needs to check that.

Q157 **Tim Loughton:** Chief Constable, you mentioned the Serious Violence Strategy last year and now the Violent Crime Taskforce, although it is not clear what it has done. You are right there was some very good stuff in that. This whole problem we are seeing the surge in now is nothing new. Why has the Serious Violence Strategy not produced more results? What has stopped that? Is it a resources issue; is it that it is not being joined up; is it there are not serious enough recommendations in it? What would you attribute it to?

Chief Constable Thornton: I think for the last few years there has been a huge amount of work in forces on serious violence. It has been an operational priority and it has certainly been a priority in the Metropolitan Police for the last two years. I think what has happened after the appalling murders over a very short time is it went to the front pages of the newspapers and the top of the news bulletins. There has been a huge amount of operational work since then.

In terms of the strategy, it sets out those four priority areas. Most of them are about longer-term activity. There will always be a time lag, but I think our argument would be—and my perspective is—that the strategy is great. It needs to be driven and it needs some more resources behind it.

Q158 **Tim Loughton:** How can we judge the efficacy of that strategy? It is not just because it has been appearing on the front page of the press, it is not just because of the particularly tragic deaths there have been from children who have no connection with gangs or anything at all, it is because the figures are at a recent high. The strategy thus far operationally appears not to be working.

Chief Constable Thornton: I am aware that the Home Office analysts provide an information pack on the data for those meetings and we have been working with them. One of my points to officials and to the Home Secretary is can we be clear about exactly what the focus is? For example, we are measuring knife crime, firearms offences, homicides, robberies with knives. We have also started looking at assaults under-25 with knives that are not domestic violence.

My own view—and I know it went out of fashion several years ago—is some clarity about what it is we are trying to reduce. When you look at all the data, and we did again last week, there is a little bit of levelling off in London, but outside London virtually all the indicators are still going up. What I would say is if that strategy was mine I would spend a bit of time being clear about what exactly we are trying to do in the short term and what exactly we are trying to do in the long term. I know they do some work on that, but I think it could be a lot clearer, because it is not



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just about who is around the table, it is about what is the expectation of every chief across the country.

Q159 **Tim Loughton:** This is all processing stuff, this is all about how we should be looking to implement or forming taskforces or whatever to implement the whole strategy. What we are interested in and what the public is interested in is what is happening now that makes this form of knife crime, and particularly the fatalities of young people, less likely to happen. If you are saying that there appears to have been some levelling off in London but in other parts of the country, as we know, the situation is much worse and is growing much more disproportionately, is that because London is doing something right that is now reducing the problem or is it because London has exported the problem to other parts of the country? Where are the results from this activity or talking about activity?

Chief Constable Thornton: I think it is largely the former. This time last year the Metropolitan Police was given more money. It has a Violent Crime Taskforce, which is very much an operational unit, not the strategic one. It is able to surge substantial amounts of officers to where the key places are. All those tactics that I listed for the Chair, all my colleagues would agree, they are what work. The difference has been in London. It has had a bit more resource this last year to do that.

Q160 **Tim Loughton:** You are saying it is down to resources. If you were able to conjure up £1 billion, or a substantial amount of money, notwithstanding the at least six-month delay of recruiting new officers and getting them on to the frontline, albeit in a fairly rookie state, where would you prioritise, certainly given the short-term emergency that we have—hopefully a short-term emergency, the immediate emergency—where would you target additional resources to get the most bang for our buck?

Chief Constable Thornton: There are three things happening in terms of money. The first is the much more general thing that I think there is a stress and strain in policing, in core policing in particular, that is highly problematic. The £970 million increase for 2019-20 will help, but as I said, there is a delay on that. But it is not enough.

In terms of what we were saying to the Home Secretary last week, we know what works. We just need some more capacity now. I am afraid that is about asking our officers to work longer shifts, to pay for some overtime. We have come up with a whole range of ways in which we could put some more operational capacity into the system now, because that is when the problem is. That would be the argument.

I was talking to the West Midlands chief, who put in those Section 60s in Birmingham the week before last after those three tragic murders. He was moving his officers from neighbourhoods and from the operational units into that focus. Straight away the number of the outstanding logs he had in his control room went up. In effect, the phrase he used, he was



robbing Peter to pay Paul. Our point is if we are going to suppress now, if we are going to surge resources into the places that are needed, then we need some money now. That is what we have been working with officials to say what might that look like.

Q161 Tim Loughton: Finally on the preventative approach—and I entirely agree with that, to treat it as a public health priority—what has changed, do you think, other than policing it? Obviously that does not necessarily reflect what is causing more young people to want to come and do serious damage to other young people. What do you think has changed in recent times to cause this apparent spike and how big a factor—and you referred to it earlier—has off-rolling and the failure of PRUs to contain and keep on the rails some of the more problematic children who are more likely to fall into this sort of activity?

Chief Constable Thornton: The causes are complex and many. Part of it is about the way in which drug markets and the profit and the purity and availability of cocaine is clearly an issue. Because the likelihood of being arrested and charged has reduced, that is an issue. I think vulnerability in terms of children who are expelled, who are off-rolled for other reasons, who are maybe in care, maybe homeless, most of those numbers have gone up over the last three or four years. There is an issue about social media, both in terms of facilitating it for tat attacks, but also we cannot rule out an element of copycat as well.

We have talked about the link and I would point to the evidence that there are fewer officers. There is a lot less policing happening and there is more crime. I also think that colleagues around the country will say that if we believe in prevention and diversion, which we do, a lot of the organisations that were heavily involved in prevention and diversion are not there in the way they were five or 10 years ago.

Q162 Kate Green: May I return to your stop and search? You suggested that the powers under Section 1, and especially you highlighted Section 60, were there for the police to make use of. We have been hearing that the actions that were taken by the previous Home Secretary, now Prime Minister, some years ago have led to concerns that there is a hesitancy about using stop and search or there are inhibitions to doing so and as a result there are rumours that the Government might be looking to broaden the powers again. What is your view on that conversation and where do you sit in it?

Chief Constable Thornton: We probably should deal with Section 1 and Section 60 separately. In terms of Section 1, the numbers of stop and search have reduced dramatically over the last five or 10 years; they are now beginning to go up. If you spoke to operational officers or the Police Federation, they would say that they felt discouraged to use those powers. Because they were not using them frequently, there is a lack of confidence in the use of the power.



I think what has happened, particularly in the last couple of years—while we are always sensitive to the issues of community cohesion and allegations or concerns about discriminatory use of the power or disproportionate use of the power—unfortunately it is certainly the case in London that many of the lives that are being lost are boys and young men of African-Caribbean backgrounds. Knife crime is disproportionately affecting them both as victims and offenders. We need to be clear that we use the powers lawfully and fairly where appropriate. Crime is not proportionate. It affects different groups differently. I think there are some confidence issues. As I say, the use is beginning to increase and I think that is right. It has to be based on information and intelligence if it is Section 1.

The issues about Section 60 are slightly different. What happened about five years ago is there was a grave concern about Section 60, which I understand. If we are going to search somebody with no reasonable grounds in respect of that person, that is quite an intrusive thing for a police officer to do. There had always been community concern about the use of Section 60, which is specifically for when you have had large-scale, serious, public place violence.

I think about five years ago, the law did not change, but we were asked to adopt certain restrictions on our use of that power. For example, the law required an inspector to give authority, but we were asked for it to be a chief officer. The law said an authority could be for 24 hours and we were asked to restrict it to 15 in the first instance. The law says that the threshold was that there “may” be violence, and the suggestion was we should change it to there “will” be violence. I think at the time all chiefs signed up to it as a voluntary agreement, because the law certainly did not change, and as a consequence the numbers of Section 60s across the country reduced substantially, to single figures in London and probably most other forces were not doing any.

The discussion now is whether, in the light of the changed circumstances, the surge in violent crime and knife crime and homicide, that those temporary voluntary restrictions should be relaxed. That is the conversation that is certainly happening in the Home Office and we have been asked for our views on that.

Q163 Kate Green: To be clear, that is where you see the focus is taking place. You are not taking a view that the powers per se need to be changed or strengthened?

Chief Constable Thornton: The debate has been about Section 60. The chiefs of the seven forces most affected would say, “We would welcome that, but because this is so important we have had the senior officer authorise it. We have taken a view about the higher level of threshold so we got on with it. We have not let that stop us now”. The only debate about Section 1 is a particular issue that we have asked the Home Office to look at, which talks about convictions can never be part of the reasonable grounds an officer uses to search somebody. There is an



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argument that maybe a conviction for a knife crime in the last couple of years could be part of the suspicion that leads to the search. Officials are looking at that.

Q164 **Kate Green:** Finally, you have alluded to the racial patterns in terms of both victims and perpetrators of these crimes. What can be done and what is the role of the police in balancing what you have highlighted as a disproportionate impact or disproportionate experience with building confidence and trust in those communities?

Chief Constable Thornton: It is really important that when an officer is going to use his or her power under Section 1 it is based on the law and the reasonable grounds that somebody is in possession of that article and that the whole search—which is an intrusion, of course—is done with respect and done fairly. Reasonable grounds in that regard are quite an objective process and they should be. They can be scrutinised at a later date.

That is not to say that anybody is dismissive of the concerns of some communities. Part of the good thing about work on stop and search over the last few years and what is happening now is that if there is a particular area, part of the work that we will do is not just about being highly visible in the hotspots, but it is about that community engagement, it is about the neighbourhood officers explaining to communities what is going on. In particular where Section 60 is used, there is a voluntary requirement to have those discussions and those conversations with the community so they understand why it is happening. We do not allow the concerns to stop us from doing the right thing, but we are very careful about the context in which we are doing it and spend a lot of time trying to explain to communities why that is necessary.

Q165 **Kate Green:** And monitoring the way in which communities are receiving and experiencing that and factoring that in?

Chief Constable Thornton: Yes, and if you look across the country, whether it is Mayor's Office in London or indeed quite a few police and crime commissioners, they will have stop and search independent advisory groups or stop and search working groups. Part of what they will do is they will look at the reports that are written by the officers to ask are they reasonable, are they fair. You will have community engagement often at a force level and I think also in London at a borough level.

Q166 **Kate Green:** Would you recognise though there is still substantial concern among those communities?

Chief Constable Thornton: Of course we do.

Q167 **Stuart C. McDonald:** There is one further issue to pursue and it arises from evidence you gave to Mr Loughton earlier. 2018 was one of the worst years on record for knife deaths among under-20s, but the fact is that 2017 was even worse. Do you have any concerns about how long it



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seems to have taken for this to become a national priority? Has the response been too slow?

Chief Constable Thornton: As I said, it has been an operational priority for several years. Because of the tragic deaths, as I say, it has very much been raised in general civil society over the last few weeks. For example, in terms of knife crime we have been running an operation, which we call Operation Sector, for the last four years since 2015. That is twice a year we do a concerted, multi-force operation against knife crime. We are currently running one at the moment. I am glad to say every single force and British Transport Police are involved in it. We do stop and search, of course, we do weapon sweeps, we do intelligence-led work against habitual knife carriers, we do test-purchase operations, we target the transport hubs and we do educational work as well.

I have some of the information from when we last did it in September last year. What was interesting was on the test purchase, where we go into a store with a young person to see if they will sell to underage. Of the 496 test-purchase operations that were carried out in shops by 20 forces last September, 99 failed that. For about 20% to be failing, that is higher than I would normally expect in a test purchase operation. That is a good example of the education needed in terms of retailers to make sure that they are being absolutely clear about checking age before they sell knives. Also last September 1,300 educational events in 10 forces, working in schools doing workshops.

Q168 **Stuart C. McDonald:** I absolutely get what you are saying about an operational response, but all the steps that have been taken in the last two or three months, why did that not happen in the year previously? What are the mechanisms in the forum for feeding into the Home Office that we have a problem, there is a drastic increase in a certain type of crime that needs a strategic change in direction, and why did it not happen in relation to knife crime say 12 months ago?

Chief Constable Thornton: I do not think I can answer for the Home Office on that. All I can say is operationally we have been doing a lot of work on knife crime.

Q169 **Stuart C. McDonald:** I do not need an answer on behalf of the Home Office, but have police been feeding into the Home Office that there has to be a strategic response? Why have there been all these announcements and strategic announcements and strategies in the last two or three months? Why not a year ago?

Chief Constable Thornton: The Serious Violence Strategy was published in April 2018. From my recollection, that would have been in development probably for a good six to 12 months beforehand, because these things take some time for consultation and to get people's views. So I think there has been work going on.

It is not to criticise that work. My own view is it still needs to be stepped up to the next level, because I do not think we have a concerted plan for



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making it happen at a national level and I am not sure we have all the resources in place. One of the things I mentioned earlier was that I think that the work in London on setting up the violence reduction unit, MOPAC—the Mayor’s Office is doing that—very much linked to the Glasgow model. Wouldn’t it be great if we had that sort of approach in several of our major cities, not just in London and maybe Birmingham?

Q170 Stuart C. McDonald: What I want to get a handle on is say, for example, next year there is different type of crime that there is a sudden upsurge in. Is the problem that there is not a forum in which the police say to the Home Office that we need a strategic change in direction here, or is it that the Home Office does not take it seriously until it becomes big news?

Chief Constable Thornton: What we need to think about is that since 2012 and the introduction of police and crime commissioners, the policy has been very much about local leadership. From 2010 all the national targets and a lot of the national structures were abolished because there was a particular political focus on local police and crime commissioners, as elected people, clearly holding their chiefs to account and setting out the police and crime plan locally.

To a certain extent for a long time the focus has been on that local leadership. I think in more recent years, whether it is a serious organised crime strategy and the Serious Violence Strategy, you have the Home Office beginning to step up a little bit. Part of it is a political disposition where it was seen as very local. My own view is that the Home Office could step up more, but of course they need to make sure that they do not undermine the role of police and crime commissioners in doing so.

Q171 Stuart C. McDonald: Do we need to rebuild some of the national strategic leadership that was dismantled a few years back?

Chief Constable Thornton: You will get me into a lot of trouble for saying this. I think that where we have so many young people dying in our streets, we need a much more concerted response from Government.

Q172 Chair: In terms of that relationship between the Government and the police and crime commissioners, in terms of what it is, let’s suppose you had a taskforce that was meeting fortnightly. Let’s suppose the Home Secretary was really going to get a grip of this and hold a meeting every fortnight and was going to pull in all the key people from the Education Department, from police forces across the country and so on. What do you think that taskforce would then be doing in order to make this plan work?

Chief Constable Thornton: I think how police and crime commissioners play into that would need to be very carefully negotiated between Ministers and police and crime commissioners, in a way, politician to politician. What would we see? Last week there was the big debate about vulnerable children and expulsions and people referral units. Surely we should be getting people around the table and asking what is the



evidence for this. If there is an issue with thousands of children who are not in school most of the time, who are extremely vulnerable, what are we doing to stop that? How can we make sure that the programme in this Department complements that? There is work that can be done nationally.

One of the concerns we have is the sentencing on knife crime and whether the second offence is leading to a custodial sentence or not. There is an argument that there should always be a bit of discretion for judges, but I think it would be really useful to have, whether it is the Lord Chancellor or the Ministry of Justice, at the table saying, "We know that second time it is happening in 90% of the cases and we think that is probably okay". Where are we having those sorts of debates?

I also think that there is an aspect to this that is local. One of the reasons why my chief constable colleagues were saying, "Can't the officials come out and see how it is working on the ground?" is because the joint work we need to do nationally needs to be replicated locally. It is happening in some places, but I think colleagues think it could happen a lot more.

For example, in Birmingham now they have the charity, I think it is the charity of Redthread, which is now working in the main hospital, the Queen Elizabeth Hospital, I think it is, and it is about to extend that to the hospitals in Wolverhampton and Coventry. It is a Glasgow model where you have people in the hospital who talk to victims who have come in with serious stab wounds or other injuries. They call it a teachable moment. The idea is that people then are maybe more inclined to say they need some help to get out of the mess they are in, to get out of the offending spiral. That sort of work is seen to work pretty well in Scotland. In how many of our hospitals do we have that sort of approach? Of course that has to be done with local partners, with local health partners, with the local authority, with local police working at the local level as well as work in London.

Q173 Chair: Would it be fair to say if we had this fortnightly Home Office Minister or Home Secretary chaired meeting with every fortnight papers or proposals from a different Department on looking at exclusions, looking on sentencing, looking at what was happening in the hospitals and so on, that that would be hugely helpful, but it is not happening at the moment?

Chief Constable Thornton: It is certainly not happening at the moment. Whether it is fortnightly, I do not know, but I think something that has pace and a sense of concerted action. This is not a problem for the Home Office or the Home Secretary. We have to ask ourselves why a child takes a knife to harm another child. I think that is a question for much more than just the police service or indeed the Home Office.

Q174 Chair: But the Home Office could pull those people together to ask those questions?



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Chief Constable Thornton: I think it is quite hard for the Home Secretary to do that with his peers. My view is it is a job for No. 10.

Q175 **John Woodcock:** Chief Constable, it is very valuable to hear your assessment and suggestions on the system-wide approach needed. However, can I take you back into something that is specifically within the ambit of the police? To what extent are you aware of officers within different forces exercising a level of discretion over whether to prosecute young people for knife crime? The reason I specifically ask this is that professionals dealing with vulnerable people in my area have raised concerns that the deterrent effect of the two strikes and out is potentially being undermined in the eyes of young people, who are saying, "I know so and so; they were caught with a knife and they were not prosecuted".

Chief Constable Thornton: Having looked at the figures recently, whether you are talking about arrests or prosecutions, you often get huge variations across forces. I think it is really important that we are always asking why we have those variations. It is not that the top is right and the bottom is wrong, but understanding what is happening there. Of course the decision to prosecute is a decision made by the Crown Prosecution Service, not by police.

John Woodcock: Forgive me, yes, I spoke inaccurately. I meant to put forward to arrest and put forward for prosecution.

Chief Constable Thornton: There are anomalies, or not anomalies, there are differences across the forces. I do know that one of my colleagues last week was sharing that information with colleagues for them to look at what were they doing.

Q176 **John Woodcock:** Perhaps understanding me quite carefully, you say it is not to say that the bottom is wrong, but for most of us looking on the outside, those outlier forces that put forward a smaller proportion for prosecution are potentially quite gravely undermining the deterrent effect.

Chief Constable Thornton: I might want to give you a written note on this because I am going outside my very particular knowledge. I think the data would only show variations in charging. We do not count when papers go to the Crown Prosecution Service. We can count arrests or charges.

Q177 **John Woodcock:** Let's do this on the basis of charging.

Chief Constable Thornton: The reason why I say the top might not necessarily be the right thing is because I could see it being an argument that in some areas, for the first offence, you have very good diversion, you have very good rehabilitation. You might be able to put some sort of conditional caution, some sort of package around a young person. Because of course there are not two distinct groups of offenders and victims. Sometimes the people who end up being victims have their own knives used against them. It is not two very distinct groups. I can see an



argument that colleagues might make, which is that charging on the first is not always the right thing to do. Chair, if I can, I am outside my particular knowledge and we can do a bit of information for you.

Q178 **Chair:** I want to invite the rest of the panel in a moment, but before I do so, Chief Constable, can we thank you? It is obviously your last appearance before us in your current role. Thank you for the work that you have done for the National Police Chiefs' Council. We very much appreciate your leadership on that and wish you well in your new role as Anti-Slavery Commissioner. Is there anything else, if this is your last role as NPCC head? This is an opportunity to say to us anything else that you think should change, either around what the Home Office or the Government more widely are doing on policing, not just on knife crime, but any final thoughts around policing more widely.

Chief Constable Thornton: I have always said to colleagues that arguments must be more sophisticated than the bleeding-stumps argument. I can only be fair to my colleagues and say that core policing is under such strain. We do not like the fact that the numbers of arrests are going down or the numbers of charges are going down. We do not like the fact it is taking us longer to get to calls when people really need our help. I think there is a stress and strain in the system. The extra money for 2019-20 will help, but I do not think it is enough. One of our arguments to the Home Secretary last week was whenever there is a spending review, for however long that spending review is, we need to have serious investment in policing.

Chair: Thank you very much.