

Work still to be done to tackle ‘hidden crime’ of stalking

SUSSEX Police is leading the way when it comes to dealing with the ‘hidden crime’ of stalking and harassment but there remains ‘a lot of work to be done’, a scrutiny panel has heard.

The Sussex Police and Crime Panel reviewed the results of an inspection commissioned by Police and Crime Commissioner Katy Bourne into how the force deals with such issues.

HM Inspectorate of Constabulary and Fire and Rescue Services found the force had made ‘great efforts’ to ensure it takes stalking allegations seriously, which ‘other forces could learn from’.

However, while this had contributed to a whopping 540 per cent increase in stalking reports since 2017, they weren’t always effectively dealt with and the percentage of reports leading to a charge was below the national average.

Mrs Bourne said the force was ‘disappointed’ by some of the report’s conclusions, but it was ‘way in advance of any police force in the country’ and had worked hard to change the ‘culture and ethos’ around how the issue was dealt with.

She said: “We’re just scratching the surface and a lot of people don’t realise they’re being stalked. This is a hidden crime and there are many victims out there who are suffering in silence.”

Panel chairman Cllr Bill Bentley said: “This panel has always been supportive of anything that can be done to identify miscreants and prevent issues from becoming more serious. There’s an awful lot of work to be done still before we start to turn the tide.”

At the meeting, held at County Hall, in Lewes, today (Fri 28), Mrs Bourne also introduced her annual report for the past year, which had marked a ‘turning point’ for the force.

Funding from an increase in the police precept and using up to £17m from reserves had protected 476 posts previously threatened due to funding cuts and enabled recruitment of an extra 400 police officers, PCSOs and specialist staff.

Achievements during the year included initiation of the REBOOT programme to target young people at risk of violence or gang behaviour and a new rural crime strategy which included specialist training for officers.

Panel members raised concerns from the public about getting through to the 101 non-emergency telephone line, with Mrs Bourne conceding recruitment and retention of call centre staff was a ‘knotty issue’. The panel said it would continue to review the matter over the next year.

The Sussex Police and Crime Panel’s next meeting will take place on Friday, September 27.

Ends