



Northern Ireland
Assembly

Committee for Infrastructure

OFFICIAL REPORT (Hansard)

Road Safety:
Police Service of Northern Ireland

7 October 2020

NORTHERN IRELAND ASSEMBLY

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Members present for all or part of the proceedings:

Miss Michelle McIlveen (Chairperson)
Mr David Hilditch (Deputy Chairperson)
Ms Martina Anderson
Mr Roy Beggs
Mr Cathal Boylan
Mr Keith Buchanan
Mrs Dolores Kelly
Ms Liz Kimmins
Mr Andrew Muir

Witnesses:

Chief Inspector Diane Pennington Police Service of Northern Ireland
Assistant Chief Constable John Roberts Police Service of Northern Ireland

The Chairperson (Miss McIlveen): We welcome to the meeting Assistant Chief Constable John Roberts and Chief Inspector Diane Pennington, who is chief inspector for road policing. Good morning. You are both very welcome.

Mr Beggs: Chair, I declare an interest as treasurer of Carrickfergus road safety committee.

Mr Hilditch: I declare an interest as chairman of Carrickfergus road safety committee.

The Chairperson (Miss McIlveen): OK. Thank you very much.

You are both very welcome to the meeting this morning. Your presentation has come highly recommended by members of the Policing Board, so, if you are content, you can go through it with us, and members will follow up with some questions.

Assistant Chief Constable John Roberts (Police Service of Northern Ireland): Yes, OK.

The Chairperson (Miss McIlveen): Thank you.

Assistant Chief Constable Roberts: Thank you very much for the opportunity to speak to you today. You mentioned presentations, and I need to clarify something. We were going to make some opening comments and then take questions. Is that your understanding also?

The Chairperson (Miss McIlveen): Yes, of course. Absolutely.

Assistant Chief Constable Roberts: Thank you. By way of introduction, I am temporary Assistant Chief Constable with responsibility for the operational support department, which includes roads policing, our tactical support groups (TSGs), armed response vehicles, the police college and some other areas. With me is Chief Inspector Diane Pennington, who is the head of the road policing unit. Roads policing is her full-time role. I know that you received a briefing in advance of the meeting, but the PSNI roads policing unit has over 170 officers and staff who are engaged full-time in roads policing. That is a significant commitment by the Police Service of Northern Ireland.

It is worth stating that road safety can affect everyone in our community, and, despite the good progress that has been made on it, there are still regular tragedies on the roads. Sadly, as of yesterday, 46 people lost their life on the roads in Northern Ireland in this calendar year, and we are very mindful that that is 46 families who are without a loved one in this year alone. It is something that we make a significant commitment to, that we are investing in and that we want to invest in further in the years ahead.

To briefly summarise, our resource is based across the country. We have dedicated full-time units that are based in the Portadown and Antrim areas that provide a 24/7 response to the strategic road network and carry out enforcement as required on that network. We also have further support groups in Fermanagh and Derry/Londonderry that carry out enforcement on a proactive. We also have a collision investigation unit that works out of Lisburn and covers the whole country. It responds to and investigates all fatal road traffic collisions, and it assists local district policing with any serious injury collisions. We are very pleased to have that resource. It has specialists in investigating fatal road traffic collisions, and their expertise has grown over many years and is shown in their ability to work with forensic scientists, interpret scenes of fatal road traffic collisions and, if required, submit papers to the Public Prosecution Service (PPS). We also have a road policing development unit that helps to manage our policy and some other specialist functions in roads policing. In that unit, we have traffic management officers who work with partners on alterations to the road network, give advice on potential changes to speed limits and assist with large operations where traffic management plans may be required.

We have road education officers who assist in engaging with vulnerable road users, such as those in schools and other groups, as necessary. It is worth saying that there is a long-term trend over many years in that those who lose their life and become injured tend to be, first, men and, secondly, to be in the age group of 16 to 24. That is maybe not that surprising and is related to that age group's likelihood to accept risk, act in a way that displays more risk behaviours and succumb to peer pressure and that type of thing. That 16-to-24 age group of males is, sadly, where we see more victims and more injured.

The fixed penalty processing centre is in the policing estate. Between 2007 and 2019, it processed almost 190,000 fixed penalty tickets.

We have undertaken some recent initiatives that you may well be aware of. We participate in and regularly deploy in the close pass cyclist safety scheme. There are probably three areas of focus for us going forward, and, while the numbers remain small, the growth areas concern the three categories from which most persons are, sadly, killed or injured on the roads: cyclists, motorcyclists and elderly pedestrians. We intend to focus on those categories going forward. The close pass scheme is one example of that. Secondly, last month we launched the PSNI intercept team. That is a pilot scheme that is in line with the national direction whereby policing the roads has a greater focus on not just excess speed but on identifying where criminals use the road network in pursuit of their criminal activities. The intercept team relies on automatic number plate recognition (ANPR) and, using that technology, police officers can receive alerts about criminals who may be using the roads and can intercept any suspects where appropriate. Where it is relevant we will use powers to seize vehicles, remove dangerous vehicles from the road and prevent people using the road network in further pursuit of crime. It is important to say that it is not just about motoring offences per se but about wider criminality. That pilot was launched last month. We will review the process on the conclusion of the pilot. If it is successful, we hope to reach out wider and enhance our capability.

Last week, we launched a second pilot, which is our safer transport team, in conjunction with Translink. That has a small team of officers who will work in partnership with Translink on the transport network in the transport hubs and on trains and buses across the country. It is about reducing antisocial behaviour on the infrastructure and network and dealing with crime.

We are also enhancing our capability in the aforementioned collision investigation unit, and we are enhancing the training of its officers to detective standard, given the complexity of some of the investigations.

Touching briefly on statistics, as you are probably aware, they are published and are in the public domain. We also report to the Policing Board on the road safety elements of the policing plan. Whilst we separate the statistics between fatal collisions and persons who are seriously injured, it is probably the combined total that is more useful when looking at the figures, because, in such very tragic circumstances, there is sometimes a fine line between those who, sadly, pass away as a result of a collision and those who are seriously injured. We do not make light of the serious injuries. There is a long-term downward trend from previous decades, when, generally, -the figures were much higher. As I said, in this year to date, sadly, 46 people have lost their life on the roads. Going back to the '70s and '80s, those figures were in the hundreds, but they have been maintained at a much lower level in the last 10 years.

COVID-19 has clearly paid a large part in there being less traffic on the roads, particularly between March and June. With less traffic on the roads, we expect fewer collisions. This year to date there has been a reduction overall of 108 in the total number of persons who were killed or seriously injured. That is down from 481 last year to 373 this year. The figures are quite small, but our available statistics break down by policing district and council areas in the different parts of the country where the collisions happened and by the age, gender etc of the persons killed or injured.

It is also probably worth stating that over 41% of prosecutions that go through the courts in Northern Ireland relate to motoring offences. That is quite significant. Between August 2019 and July 2020, when a lot of the COVID period in the earlier part of the year is captured, there were over 45,000 detections of motoring offences. That is a decrease of 10% on the previous 12 months, but, as I said, it could be put down chiefly to COVID. The largest offender group is those who speed, with a total of 8,000 detections. That does not include the detections from the Road Safety Partnership of an additional 47,000 speeding offences for the same 12-month period.

Her Majesty's Inspectorate of Constabulary and Fire and Rescue Services (HMICFRS) produced a report in July 2020 called 'Roads Policing: Not optional' that made 13 recommendations. Not all the recommendations relate directly to policing; some relate to the Department for Transport (DfT) in England and Wales and the Home Office. In general terms, in conjunction with our partners we will consider how each recommendation applies to Northern Ireland. That reflects my earlier comments about road policing being viewed as not just about excess speed but about the manner in which the roads network is being used by criminals on occasions. It also reflects how, before the report, we had a general desire to invest and enhance our capability in technology, to have more professionalism and to put in additional resource in line with other demands in road safety.

I will pause there, Chair, for questions, if that is OK.

The Chairperson (Miss McIlveen): OK. Thank you. Diane, do you have anything that you wish to say at this stage?

Chief Inspector Diane Pennington (Police Service of Northern Ireland): No. I am happy to take any questions that come out of that.

The Chairperson (Miss McIlveen): Thank you very much, and thank you for your paper. The Department will carry out the review of the road safety strategy. I assume that there will be considerable contact with you about that review. The Committee has noted that there has been a substantial reduction in the budget that has been allocated to road safety over the last number of years. As a consequence, there will be a reduction in the display of the shock-and-awe advertising campaign as well. How effective has that been in past years in affecting behavioural change in drivers?

Assistant Chief Constable Roberts: As I stated, there has been a significant reduction in fatalities and serious injuries since the pre-2010 period. We probably cannot point to any one factor for that, but I have no doubt that the advertising campaign has been impactful and has played a part, as have the increase in technology and in detection through the camera network and the enhancements that manufacturers have made in vehicle safety. When you look back two decades, you see that it was not compulsory to wear a seat belt. There are probably a number of different factors, but, yes, it could be argued that the advertising campaign is a significant factor.

The Chairperson (Miss McIlveen): As MLAs, we are approached by constituents about speed ramps and other infrastructure. How effective are education and the physical infrastructure side of road safety?

Chief Inspector Pennington: ACC Roberts mentioned the traffic management office in the opening remarks, and it is about the link for physical infrastructure between the PSNI and the Department for Infrastructure. If there are significant changes to parts of the road network, such as your example of speed bumps, Chair, we work really closely together. We could not do it without DFI input, and I think that it would probably say the same about us. We work closely together to make sure that we put the appropriate safety measures in place albeit that they are ones that will work with the minimum of enforcement going forward. We generally get good feedback through police and community safety partnerships (PCSPs), which are our neighbourhood colleagues in the police, and they may have brought our traffic management officers in as subject matter experts, if you like, in that area. It can be on a case-to-case basis, but, generally, there is good feedback.

The Chairperson (Miss McIlveen): If an area of concern is raised by a community, how do you prioritise resource? You are challenged with the number of officers that you have, and I know from experience that you may identify various areas but you can deploy only the van at certain times or it may be deployed somewhere else. How do you manage the deployment of the resource that you have in order to identify where there is a problem?

Chief Inspector Pennington: Again, that is done in partnership. A community concern site, as we call it, may be raised with us in various ways. It can come through the PCSP, as I mentioned, or it might come through our neighbourhood colleagues who have been engaging with members of the community or it can come directly in a letter, for example, from a member of the community and, indeed, sometimes from MLAs and councillors. We share the details of that site, which a lot of the time is to do with excess speed, with the Northern Ireland Road Safety Partnership, or sometimes the details come directly to it and it shares them with us. For example, my units in Mahon Road may get reports about speeding on a road in Markethill. As part of our routine patrol pattern, we will go out there, usually with the laser, and monitor the speed. If appropriate, we will stop motorists and prosecute them, so we will give them tickets. That site will also be on the schedule for the safety camera vans that you see going about. It is really about reacting on a case-by-case basis to what is raised with us. We always like to stop people speeding, not to catch them speeding. Sometimes residents will come back to us and say, "Yes, you were there three times in the last two months", and we can actually see a significant drop-off.

The Chairperson (Miss McIlveen): The statistics that you have on speed and accidents will then inform people about any additional infrastructure that may be required, be that a reduction in speed in an area or other physical calming measures. In the event of accidents where police are not in attendance or the incident has not been reported, obviously, those statistics are not collated. Anecdotally, people will know that there is a hotspot in an area, but the statistics do not reflect that. How do we come to a better reflection of an area if there is no police response?

Assistant Chief Constable Roberts: We have stats for incidents where people, first, sadly, lose their life or, secondly, are seriously injured. We also have stats for minor injuries, and that happens in the majority of collisions, so we know that and where they are.

The other thing that helps to inform the partnership is the data that comes from the Department on speed surveys and how we factor some of that into the partnership for our deployment. The deployments are based on where incidents have happened, where there has been previous enforcement and where there are community concerns. It is captured. It may take time for a particular location to be escalated to the degree where it is on the radar more, but a strong system is in place from those different sets of data in order to inform where our deployments are.

The Chairperson (Miss McIlveen): We have probably all experienced that type of information coming back, and you take from it that someone needs to be seriously injured or killed for something to happen. It becomes something that we have to manage as well when residents are very concerned about an area but the information does not necessarily tally with their experience.

Assistant Chief Constable Roberts: The community concern aspect, which Diane mentioned, is where we are capturing that, and we are very responsive to it. It goes to the heart of our ethos of policing with the community, and, where the community is concerned, we will endeavour to respond to it. It is not the case that someone has to lose their life before there will be interest in it.

The Chairperson (Miss McIlveen): Interestingly, in your paper you say how you are keen to trial Operation Snap. Perhaps you could talk to us about that and about how you are awaiting legislative change from DFI to allow it to happen.

Assistant Chief Constable Roberts: In England and Wales, careless driving offences can be dealt with by fixed penalty notice, which is not the case here. That legislative change would allow for a more speedy resolution and would take out significant demand from the court system. Diane might want to say more about Operation Snap.

Chief Inspector Pennington: We have been very encouraged by the reports that are coming back from our colleagues in England and Wales about how that is working, and we would really welcome the change in legislation here to allow us to issue fixed penalty tickets for the offence of careless driving, as that would then allow us to set up the operation.

The Chairperson (Miss McIlveen): Has it been progressed with the Department?

Chief Inspector Pennington: Yes. We are liaising with the Department, but, at the end of the day, it holds the responsibility in that area to make the change to allow us to issue fixed penalty tickets.

The Chairperson (Miss McIlveen): Are you finding a willingness from the Department to do that? If that is something that it is willing to do, it will come through this Committee. I just want to get a sense of when it might likely come to us.

Chief Inspector Pennington: We have not received any timescales yet, but we are hopeful that it will be resolved before too long.

Assistant Chief Constable Roberts: We could formalise that and come back to you, if that is OK, with any envisaged timescales and any anticipated hurdles.

The Chairperson (Miss McIlveen): That would be useful. Thank you.

Mr Hilditch: Thanks, Chair. I do not know what you have left me to ask now *[Laughter.]* I am interested in Operation Snap. That is very good. It will be interesting to see how it pans out if it ever comes in. There is different terminology for what used to be called "DIC" or "drunk in charge". Is it "driving under the influence" or something like that?

Assistant Chief Constable Roberts: There are two offences there: driving whilst unfit and driving with excess alcohol.

Mr Hilditch: Is it still the case that the only time that somebody is caught is when they have made a mistake and the police have seen them not signalling, for example? Are there still specific roadblocks in the way — they used to be in place years ago — to put people off driving under the influence? There is a worry that drink driving is still very prevalent in the community, and I get reports all the time and pass them on.

Assistant Chief Constable Roberts: It is certainly not the case that only when we receive a report will somebody be detected. It is also worth saying that driving with drink or drugs in your system is the fifth most common reason for an accident. Driving without due care or attention, being in the wrong position on the road, maybe not taking heed of a traffic sign or signal are more common reasons for collision than drink or drugs. However, it is high on the radar of all police officers when they are on duty.

Drugs are more prevalent in our society, and there are more detections now of people driving whilst unfit through drugs than there used to be, but there are a number of ways in which users who may be under the influence of drink or drugs come to police attention. It could be from a report from a member of the public, through observation or from a collision. We have specific operations in place for that also.

Mr Hilditch: I feel that it is pot luck at times. Gone are the days of the old breathalysers, as they used to be called. There were road stops throughout Northern Ireland on certain weekends at night. To my mind, it is far too easy for people to jump in the car at the minute.

Chief Inspector Pennington: I reassure you that, in Northern Ireland, we are the only part of the UK that has legislation to do authorised vehicle checkpoints, which is the nature of what you are thinking of.

Mr Hilditch: Yes, the way that it used to be.

Chief Inspector Pennington: That came in three years ago in Northern Ireland. Someone of the rank of at least inspector can authorise a vehicle checkpoint to be set up on a road, and every vehicle can be stopped on that road and the driver required to provide a specimen of breath. In a way, it is as close as we come to random breath testing. That is something that we use all year round, but we really focus on it at Christmas. In the years since we brought that in, the number of preliminary breath tests that we have been able to carry out has really increased because we have not had to have someone committing a moving traffic offence or a suspicion that they are driving under the influence, as you say. It has been very useful legislation for us.

Mr Hilditch: That is very good to hear. On the education side of things, in my road safety committee, we work with the local community police who attend. They are very useful, they take part in projects and various things and attend meetings, so it is quite a good relationship. Most of our work is with children of primary-school age. What are you doing to target students in the 16- to 24-year-old bracket?

Chief Inspector Pennington: COVID is working a bit against us at the moment, because, at this time of year, our Roadsafes Roadshow programme would be in full swing.

Mr Hilditch: Is it still going?

Chief Inspector Pennington: Yes, it is still going strong. I am not sure if the members have seen it. I extend an open invitation to anybody to come along and see it. We do 10 to 12 of those a year, normally, for secondary-school-age children, that is, sixth-year students, so it is for new drivers. We try to get their attention at the start of their driving career. It is a partnership presentation. It is hard-hitting. I still get a tear in my eye, I have to say, and I have seen it dozens and dozens of times. It is very impactful. We can do it for up to 800 students in a day in two sittings, but, with COVID, as you will understand, we have not been able to do that this year.

Our education officers are working very closely with schools on providing some video material, which they will be able to give to the students. It will not replace what we do with the Roadsafes Roadshow, but we hope that it will go some way towards it.

Assistant Chief Constable Roberts: In addition to dedicated education officers in respect of road safety, I am sure that you will all be aware that, as an organisation, we have increased our footprint of neighbourhood policing officers across the country. Part of that review of neighbourhood policing also includes consideration of our presence in schools across the country and how we engage more effectively with young people. Whilst road safety is only a small part of that potential agenda, because there is a vast array of other subjects, it increases the police engagement with young people generally and creates additional opportunities to discuss a range of topics, including road safety.

Mr Boylan: Thank you very much for your presentation. You said, at the start, that any road death is horrendous for a family, and, recently, in my constituency a young girl tragically lost her life. I have been in different Committees over the years, and there is no doubt that we have made progress, but as you said, there have been 46 road deaths, but one death is one too many.

The biggest percentage of deaths have been in that age bracket, but those have happened widely on our rural roads as opposed to urban settings. There should be a bigger emphasis on that because rural people have no choice but to get vehicles of their own because of the public transport network. They are totally reliant on being independent. It is something we need to look at.

Ten years ago, there were not as many drivers on the roads, and it seems that most 17-year-olds now pass their tests as quickly as possible. It counts in the overall figure. Fifty road deaths, on average, per year is really bad, but we have made progress. On average, how many drivers are on the roads? Is it up by 3% every year? Do you have those figures?

Assistant Chief Constable Roberts: Do you mean how many people are on the roads?

Mr Boylan: How many people pass their tests every year? Do you have those figures?

Assistant Chief Constable Roberts: Unfortunately, we do not have figures with us for how many road users there are.

Mr Boylan: It is certainly climbing because more people are doing their tests.

Chief Inspector Pennington: Just before I came in, I saw that, as a result of the COVID restrictions, there are 2,000 people on a waiting list to do their test. Some work was done around COVID that showed that traffic volumes had decreased by around 50% during lockdown, and, of course, we then saw a drop-off in the number of people who were killed and seriously injured. Your comparison is correct: if there are fewer people on the road, there are likely to be fewer collisions. Given this new culture of working from home and remote working, it will be interesting to see whether that continues.

Mr Boylan: I mentioned that context because the Chair mentioned the road safety strategy, and anything that you can bring along and whatever we learn from COVID can play a part. As I represent a border constituency, I have to ask this: do you engage with an Garda Síochána?

Assistant Chief Constable Roberts: Absolutely. There is regular engagement on strategy, such as how we will work together in the planning of joint operations, and on live-time incidents. For example, I mentioned the interceptor team, and, where necessary, should criminals be using the border to make good their escape or in pursuit of their criminality, yes, we work, and will continue to work, on an operational basis with an Garda Síochána.

The other point is on the volume of road users. Compared with the 70s, 80s and 90s, there are more vehicles on the road now. Whilst we do not have the figures, I think that we can all agree that there are more vehicles on the road. We also have vehicles that are capable of doing greater speeds, and we have more young people on the road too, yet, notwithstanding the tragedy for the families involved, we have a long-term trend of decreasing figures.

Mr Boylan: Yes, we do, but it is about the balance between engineering and education. That age group was mentioned before, and I think that education is part of the programme as well.

I have a couple of other points. I am glad that you mentioned the Markethill Road. I do not know what side you are on, but you can take a wee trip down to Poyntzpass, then over to Ballymacnab and down into Middletown. There are some schemes over there, but, in some of those areas, we want traffic-calming schemes outside schools. All of us have dealt with this before, and we need to focus on it now. I know that the local PCSP teams are working on it, but I would like to see, not so much a more proactive approach, but more evidence from you to get those schemes in place.

The speed indicator devices (SIDs) are fairly good. They may not be a permanent tool, but I would like to see a programme from you to say that they might work. When I talk to the traffic branch in DFI, I am told, "You need certain stats. You need certain things". We should be proactively looking at those types of things together.

I have two points on the briefing. One is on the close pass scheme for cyclists. We are trying to get cyclists on the road, but the big issue is safety. How does the close pass scheme work to try to encourage more cyclists onto the road?

My final question is about the safe transport team. Could you expand on exactly how that works? Is it a role in the context of COVID as well?

Assistant Chief Constable Roberts: I will take the second question, and Diane can answer the one on the close pass scheme.

No, the safe transport team is absolutely not just related to COVID. We were planning that in any event, and we do not really see it as a COVID function, although if there is COVID-related antisocial behaviour, the police will not step away from that. However, it involves police being deployed on the transport network, which is not something that we routinely did before. It is just a pilot, and we will review its effectiveness when it ends, but it should give confidence to people who may feel vulnerable on the transport network, particularly late at night, or to those who are vulnerable in our community that police will be present. It should discourage those who might be considering committing crime on

the transport network or engaging in antisocial behaviour. It is about enhanced policing visibility to help the community.

Mr Boylan: What about the cyclist issue?

Chief Inspector Pennington: How the close pass scheme works is that we have a police officer on a pedal bike, and he or she has a headcam on. They go out on a route that is being used by cyclists a lot and where we have been informed that there may be issues with careless driving. They can speak to colleagues who are on police motorbikes, and, if they witness a piece of bad driving, such as a driver who is coming too close to them, which is the usual thing, or overtaking on a blind bend or overtaking as someone is coming towards them — I have seen footage of that — they will radio the police motorcyclists, who will stop the driver. At the moment, we are using that as an education tool. We play back the footage to the driver to show them what happened from the cyclist's point of view. So far, we have had a very good response from all the drivers. They generally say, "I had no idea I was so close" or "I will definitely not do that again and will look out for cyclists".

Chair, you mentioned earlier the advertising campaigns, which DFI led on. There is a really good one at the moment about cyclists and respecting everybody's journey. It ties in with that. Many drivers are also cyclists at some stage in their day or week. That is what we are doing at the moment. It is also a good example of partnership because, although it was led by road policing, it is now being shared with our colleagues in districts and neighbourhoods, and they are taking it forward.

Mr K Buchanan: I have a couple of questions. The first is on your social media presence on Facebook. I will give you an example. In mid-Ulster, we had a Magherafelt page, a Cookstown page and a Dungannon page. If you were doing a speed detection exercise in, for example, a village like Newmills, that would go on to the Cookstown page for the area. It was not about the people who you had caught or that you had been seen doing it; it was a social media presence. That has now been removed to a wider, 11-district model, with mid-Ulster as one of those districts, and, in my opinion, it does not have the same impact. Someone at the far side of mid-Ulster, such as in Fivemiletown, will not engage with there being a speed camera in Kilrea or the northern end of area. Has the change with the Facebook and social media presence caused you a problem with getting your message out? Other messaging in policing is not getting out, so I would presume that yours is the same. Maybe you can prove me wrong on that.

Assistant Chief Constable Roberts: You are correct: there has been a consolidation of the number of Facebook pages that the PSNI maintains. The reason for that was an inability to maintain them all, to have enough appropriately trained users to maintain the pages and to have a level of communication that was appropriate for the Police Service. There has been some feedback, and the district that you mentioned is not the only one in which people feel that there are communities within communities and that the same message is, maybe, not as targeted and focused as it was. It is something that we will keep under review.

Mr K Buchanan: Do you see that changing for the benefit of people?

Assistant Chief Constable Roberts: We have seen benefits from the consolidation. Having done that consolidation, no decisions have been taken to create more pages. However, we remain open-minded about it, and it would be changed if necessary, but there are no plans to do so as yet.

Mr K Buchanan: OK. From memory, the Risk Awareness and Danger Avoidance Responsibility (RADAR) centre in east Belfast closed a couple of years ago. The PSNI and the DOJ put a budget into that for the safety package and Fire and Rescue and other agencies were involved. Where was the funding that the PSNI put into that directed? Was it directed towards achieving a road safety benefit?

Assistant Chief Constable Roberts: I do not have the information about where the funding went when the RADAR centre, sadly, closed. We can report back on that.

Mr K Buchanan: It would be interesting to know. I think that the figure was something like £300,000, but it was a fair lump of money. It would be interesting to know whether the PSNI looked at the benefit from that centre and where that money went.

We talked briefly about Operation Snap. When that comes into legislation, do you see there being an issue with it? It is a benefit, and I do not disagree with the principle, but do you see a problem with a neighbour touting on his neighbour?

Assistant Chief Constable Roberts: Like any part of the justice system, it will have safeguards and an appeals mechanism. No one will be wrongly in receipt of a fixed penalty notice, in the same way as anyone who receives a fixed penalty notice now has the right of appeal and can go to court to make their case if they wish. That process will remain the same, subject to the legislation. I will be surprised if there is any different to that. However, part of the process is that members of the public can submit footage, but the other side of that is that road users will know that and know it is not just the police that they need to look out for. It should increase their standard of driving. Ultimately, it is about making the roads safer for all users and taking dangerous vehicles and drivers off the roads where appropriate.

Mr K Buchanan: I have one final question, and Cathal touched on this, but it is about road deaths. There are comparable areas across the UK with similar amounts of motorway and rural roads. How does Northern Ireland compare with other areas of a similar size on the mainland? I appreciate that even one death is too many, as Cathal said. However, is this a good or bad place for road deaths, if you understand what I mean?

Chief Inspector Pennington: If we look at the figures for 2019, Northern Ireland had a 2% rise for fatalities, which was one more death compared to the previous year. In the Republic of Ireland, there was also one more death, but with a bigger sample size, that was a 0.7% rise. I do not have numbers for individual counties, but in Great Britain, as a whole, that rise was 4%. Northern Ireland is performing slightly better year-on-year in comparison with the rest of the UK.

Assistant Chief Constable Roberts: It can be difficult to make comparisons, given the nature of some of the roads in England, the high volumes of traffic and the greater volume of HGV vehicles.

The Chairperson (Miss McIlveen): Before we proceed, can I check that you have time, as four other members have indicated that they have questions? Are you content?

Assistant Chief Constable Roberts: Yes.

The Chairperson (Miss McIlveen): Thank you.

Ms Kimmins: Thank you, John and Diane. I have met you before. I declare that I am a member of the Policing Board, and it is good to see you here, as one of my questions was about partnership working with the Department. I have a couple of small points about the lockdown. An issue brought to my attention was that, because there was less traffic on the road, people were more inclined to speed. Did the police notice that, and was it an issue that became prevalent during the lockdown?

Assistant Chief Constable Roberts: There is no strong evidence base about speeding over lockdown. I am aware that members of the public may feel that, but our stats show that overall detections were down this year in comparison with last year.

Ms Kimmins: Maybe that was because there was less traffic.

Assistant Chief Constable Roberts: Yes, there was less traffic.

Ms Kimmins: I noticed that, in the April to June period, nine of the 14 deaths were vulnerable road users such as motor cyclists and pedestrians. I thought that that was interesting.

Assistant Chief Constable Roberts: Some of the trends need to be viewed over at least a three-year period. As I said earlier, we are mindful of vulnerable road users. The figures are small, but there has been an increase in the number of cyclists, motorcyclists and elderly pedestrians who have been killed or seriously injured this year. At the same time, there is an increasing trend and enthusiasm for cycling, so there are more cyclists on the road than there were five years ago, never mind 10 or 15 years ago.

Ms Kimmins: Yes. Over the lockdown period there was a lot of good weather, and that was an incentive for cyclists. My colleague mentioned schools, and the Department has recently rolled out the

20 mph zones outside 100 schools across the North. At this stage, are you able to give us any feedback on the impact or road safety benefits of the reduction in speed limits outside schools?

Assistant Chief Constable Roberts: As a general working assumption, we support anything that makes schools safer. However, I do not believe that we have any firm statistical evidence to show that there has been a benefit at those locations.

Chief Inspector Pennington: It is still early days, as Mr Roberts has said. We have expressed a desire to the Department for infrastructure that it makes sense to roll the 20 mph zones out across the majority, if not all, the schools in Northern Ireland.

Ms Kimmins: Yes, that is good to hear. We all have said that it would be beneficial. A lot of my questions have been already covered. Thank you.

The Chairperson (Miss McIlveen): If you would not mind, would you move over slightly towards the mic?

Chief Inspector Pennington: Sorry.

The Chairperson (Miss McIlveen): There is a challenge for Hansard in picking up words when everyone is speaking towards the rear of the room.

Mr Muir: At the outset, I declare that I was previously an employee of Translink, because my first question relates to the work that you are embarking on with Translink. There have been issues in north Down in the good weather, which did occur this year, though it is gone now. People were coming down to Helen's Bay and Crawfordsburn, and that required a significant police response. The tactical support group had to come down, and we had the police helicopter out in previous years. How will the work with Translink interface with the policing response on an ongoing basis to ensure that, when we get periods of good weather, you can be more proactive in dealing with these issues? Sometimes the policing response comes into place only when a lot of people have travelled to the area, and you are trying to deal with the after-effects. This year, residents were ringing me at midnight because there was still ongoing anti-social behaviour in the area, and that caused real stress and annoyance. I am really grateful for the police resources that were put there, in conjunction with Translink. The police and Translink went well beyond what they should have had to do, particularly in times of real stress in dealing with the pandemic. How will this work on an ongoing basis to assist that effort?

Assistant Chief Constable Roberts: On a basic level, it will certainly help. It is a small team of only seven officers at this time, and it is only a pilot, but it will allow us to enhance relationships with Translink to understand each other's demands better and for us to start to gain a better understanding of the Translink network and to work in partnership in a greater way. When we know that there are large numbers using the transport network to get to a location, it will allow us to profile resources accordingly to a certain area as appropriate, such as in the case you mentioned.

Some of those incidents, whilst they are not unprecedented and we have seen them in previous years, this year we saw large crowds gathering in open areas. That was, no doubt, driven by the health regulations and the fact that other areas were, quite rightly, closed. We may not see that every year.

The work will allow us to gain a greater understanding and to forward plan to a greater extent, but I would caveat that by saying that it is only a small team of officers and is only a pilot at this stage.

Mr Muir: That is appreciated. I know that there are other problems, such as in east Antrim, and that there are ongoing issues.

Mr Hilditch: It is 52 weeks of the year. It is in Greenisland and Carrick.

Mr Muir: Residents are tortured. It is awful.

Assistant Chief Constable Roberts: One of the key elements of the safer transport team is allowing people who may feel vulnerable to have greater confidence in using the transport system, and at times, our assessment will extend to saying that it is impacting residents in a certain area, as well as those using the transport network.

Mr Muir: I do really appreciate all that has happened to date and all the efforts, and I think that that initiative is a positive thing.

My last question is about the average-speed cameras that were installed on the A2 Belfast to Bangor road. That had a serious positive impact in reducing the number of people killed and seriously injured. Sadly and unfortunately, there have been people killed or seriously injured on that road, but the numbers have significantly reduced and the cameras had a good impact on that. Are there any other roads in Northern Ireland that you feel would benefit from an average-speed camera system, which ensures that speed along the whole length of that road is then reduced?

Assistant Chief Constable Roberts: That would be part of a whole wider consultation and discussion. I am not aware of any plans or any potential scope for further schemes at this time.

Chief Inspector Pennington: Apart from the most recent scheme, which was put in on the Ballynahinch Road, out towards Carryduff.

Mr Muir: OK.

Chief Inspector Pennington: That was put in very recently, so we would need to review how that is operating.

Mr Muir: Yes, it is just that I have seen the impact that it has had. I know that, previously, it was on the old A1 as well, and it reduced people's speeds. Unlike the mobile detector vans, it is ongoing. It has reduced speed in the area, and, whilst not obviously eliminating the problem, it is to be appreciated. Thank you.

Mr Beggs: Thanks for your presentation. I welcome the creation of the safe transport teams. As other members said, the problem is wider than roads alone. There is antisocial behaviour and criminals using other transport points. There is clearly a need for a transfer of knowledge and experience across district policing boundaries so that expertise can move across. Of course, antisocial activity can travel up and down railway lines.

I want to ask about any actions to deal with antisocial behaviour. I am seeking reassurance that you are trying to educate young people to make them aware of the dangers and to encourage them not to congregate in stations where there are live dangers with trains passing through. You should be warning them, but, ultimately, it may come to enforcement. In order to keep public support for this action, can you assure me that you will target ringleaders rather than some young person who happens to be standing in the wrong place when you eventually decide to move towards enforcement? Once you do that, it will be very serious for those young people. I am seeking reassurance that you will target the ringleaders in order to get a much safer station area for everybody — for the public and for people on the trains.

Assistant Chief Constable Roberts: Police engagement with any person who may be engaging in antisocial behaviour or committing a crime works on a scale of proportionality. You used the word "target", but that is not a word that we necessarily use when we are talking about young people on the transport network or elsewhere. We are certainly mindful of the impact on young people of their obtaining a criminal record, and there is a raft of safeguards, measures and steps that we go through with everybody before people find themselves facing prosecution. It is a proportionate and sensible approach that often starts with a conversation. I think that you are talking about the worst offenders and those who are maybe encouraging and inciting others to gather, and they are more likely to be met with the stronger parts of the enforcement as we move through a process that will start with a conversation.

Mr Beggs: OK. That is fine.

Community-based speed displays are becoming more common. Some community safety partnerships have managed to distribute those to members of the community. I think that they are very effective, and I get positive comments about them from members of the public. Do you find any difference in the number of complaints from, for example, villages that enforcement officers may not be able to get to as often as they wish? Is this having a positive effect? Do you have evidence that it is having a positive effect on the attitude of drivers and is reducing the number of complaints that you receive?

Assistant Chief Constable Roberts: Again, it is a working assumption that it is positive and has benefits, but we do not have specific stats to be able to show that each deployment reduces the number of complaints. However, the anecdotal feedback, as you said, is that people welcome them and that it has community support. Where possible, we hope to do as much of that as we can.

Mr Beggs: Will you attempt to gather statistics? This might be an important message. Maybe there should be further investment in this area. If possible, will you attempt to gather statistics?

Assistant Chief Constable Roberts: Your question was about statistics on complaints.

Mr Beggs: Yes, about speeding.

Assistant Chief Constable Roberts: Yes, that is probably difficult, and the level of complaints may not necessarily relate to the level of the problem. We have a lot of statistics about road safety, such as on where offences and collisions occur and all that, along with information from the Department on speed surveys, and that helps us to plan our deployments.

Mr Beggs: Turning to fixed penalty notices, I notice that you mention careless driving. Again, I can see the benefits of speedy justice. If the message gets through very quickly, there will presumably be savings in police time and court time, and it will release the courts and the police for other activities. What has been the evidence from England since they were introduced? Do penalty points go alongside a penalty notice?

Assistant Chief Constable Roberts: Normally, endorsable penalty notices come with penalty points. People who are convicted of careless driving will normally receive penalty points as part of their sentence, so we anticipate that they would come with points. I do not have figures for where it is operating elsewhere, but we will come back to you on that.

Mr Beggs: Is there a time frame for when you hope that that will come in?

Assistant Chief Constable Roberts: We have indicated that we will formalise the timescale in interaction with the Department.

Ms Anderson: Thank you for the presentation. My takeaway from the meeting is the information in relation to the percentage of court cases for motoring offences: 41% of all court proceedings relate to motoring offences. I do not think that that is widely known. You mentioned 45,000 motoring offences, 8,000 of which were for speeding, and you then said that a further 47,000 were detected by the road safety partnership. Do they receive fixed penalty notices and the like? I am trying to understand the differentiation between the two figures.

Assistant Chief Constable Roberts: Between 1 August 2019 and 31 July 2020, there were over 45,000 detections for motoring offences. That was a decrease of 10% from the previous months. Within that, there were 8,145 speeding offences. The remainder were motoring offences that were not speeding offences. In addition to that, the road safety partnership detected over 47,000 speeding offences. The 8,000 were detected by police officers, mainly within roads policing but not exclusively. Some will have been district police officers who have been trained and equipped with speed detection equipment. Does that answer your question?

Ms Anderson: Yes. I thought that they were combined, but I understand what you mean when you explain it like that. You stated that the technology is developing rapidly and that there will be a requirement to reinvest in mobile cameras. What will the new cameras do that the current ones cannot do?

Assistant Chief Constable Roberts: Operation Snap, for example, which we mentioned, is technology that seamlessly tracks from an offence to penalty. Detection technology in police vehicles changes rapidly, as does technology around how we capture that evidence and engage with the motorist in a timely way. The enhancement of the location of cameras in our ANPR network also requires consideration, which is in line with technology changing in every field.

Ms Anderson: Dash cameras and Operation Snap relate to an individual driver in a car. I understand that technology progresses and changes. I can imagine the expenditure that would be involved in

changing the cameras and reinvesting. I am interested in the rationale for that. I am sure that the Policing Board is looking into that as well. I am sure that it is justified.

I am interested in the old A5, which is notorious for accidents. What is your assessment of the positive impact of large road projects, such as the new A5 development? The A6 is a longer-term project for Derry. The Buncrana Road is to be developed as well. What is your assessment of the positive impacts that larger road schemes can have in tackling areas in which accidents have taken place because of the poor nature of the road infrastructure?

Assistant Chief Constable Roberts: When we look at the causes of accidents — just bear with me for a second — monthly figures are published on the PSNI website. In the first seven months of this year, the principal factor for those who were killed or seriously injured was wrong course or position; the second factor was excessive speed, and, moving on, the fourth factor was emerging from a minor road without care. It is difficult to say how many of those will be better or worse on a major road. It would be less likely, for example, to be in the wrong position on a wide road with clearly delineated lanes etc, but not in every case.

Ms Anderson: I appreciate that. Chair, we have talked about waiting for the Department for Infrastructure to legislate, and the Committee should ask about Operation Snap in that regard. Thank you for your answers.

The Chairperson (Miss McIlveen): Finally, as a consequence of the faults in the MOT lifts and COVID, MOTs have been delayed, and vehicle owners have been given temporary exception certificates. There is a concern that vehicle maintenance may not been kept up in the manner that it should have been in advance of an MOT test. Do you have any anecdotal evidence to suggest that that is the case?

Chief Inspector Pennington: We have not had anything, statistically or anecdotally, at the moment. It is important to remember that we focus on this, anyway. Across the UK, October is national tyre safety awareness month, and we have put bits and pieces on social media advising people on the legislative requirements for tyres, showing how to check them, and reiterating the importance of safe tyres and what can happen if your tyres are not safe. The concern is valid, Chair — absolutely. I offer a reassurance that, from the police's point of view, we are always out on the roads, not only checking defects but educating road users on how to avoid those defects. Later in our road safety calendar, one month is devoted to lighting, and we will do promotional work around that.

The Chairperson (Miss McIlveen): Thank you. I appreciate the fact that you have spent a little longer here than you had anticipated. I am grateful for that. Thank you both for the presentation and for your time this morning.

Chief Inspector Pennington: Thank you very much.

Assistant Chief Constable Roberts: May I make a final comment? We have not touched on the use of mobile phones by drivers. That was not an issue 20 years ago, and we now have legislation. In conjunction with the Department, we will want to consider the issue, keep it under review and explore future legislative opportunities. It is such a significant issue, and it is important to communities that we at least mention it here this morning.

The Chairperson (Miss McIlveen): That has been with the Committee in the last week or so in relation to increasing fines and penalty points. There is to be a further review of technology use other than phone calls. I understand that the Department is working on that. It is another important issue.