

Performance and Resources Scrutiny Programme 2022
Report to the Police, Fire and Crime Commissioner for Essex

Title of Report:	Deep Dive: Police and Crime Plan Priorities Priority: Preventing Dog Thefts
Agenda Number:	3ii)
Chief Officer	ACC Rachel Nolan
Date Paper was Written	09/03/2022
Version Number	2
Report from:	Essex Police
Date of Meeting:	30th March 2022
Author on behalf of Chief Officer:	CI 3027 Terry Balding
Date of Approval:	23/03/2022

1.0 Purpose of Report

This report provides an overview of the work completed by Essex Police in preventing dog theft and forecasting next steps on reducing / preventing dog theft.

2.0 Recommendations

The Board to note the report, measures, opportunities, and the key issues identified.

3.0 Executive Summary

In recent years a relatively low number of dog theft offences have occurred in Essex. However, an identified rise has been evidenced nationally in respect of this increasing crime type and trend. The PFCC have recognised this trend and included the objective to do more to protect pets and build confidence in how Essex Police handle dog thefts to the Police and Crime Plan.

Essex Police, through the Local Policing Support Unit and other teams, have quickly reacted to the trend and recommendations of the National Pet Task force. Essex Police are now fully integrated into the National Working Group and effectively

tackling crime through review of all investigations, introduction of a proactive ability to respond to intelligence, and joined up working with partners including Crime Stoppers, RSPCA, and Dog Watch.

Trends since 2019 indicate dog theft is increasing, however there is a lot of variation from month to month throughout this period. There were 68 dog thefts in 2021 – an increase of 20 offences compared to 2020. Of those 68 offences, 60 were classified ‘All Other Theft Offences’, six Burglary Personal, one vehicle offence, one criminal damage. On average, there were 5.7 offences recorded per month in 2021 – an increase from 4.0 in 2020. It is forecast that levels will remain low but consistent messaging is key to reassure and public and keep confidence high.

The Rural Engagement Team create and attend Dog events with Dog watch to promote good dog skills, crime prevention advice and reassurance.

The Resolution centre have ensured a consistent approach is taken to all crime reports with all victims referred to Victim Support and the Rural Engagement Team SPOC is tagged into each crime report to ensure enquires are explored and identify opportunities.

The Force Intelligence Bureau are exploring work with CrimeStoppers and previously completed global tasking to obtain all intelligence. The Media team have consistently been involved in the National and Essex working group to deliver reassuring and consistent messages – including appeals, advertising Dog events, and sharing preventive messages. It has been recognised nationally the impact on owners of dogs particularly the emotional heart. Consequently, legislation is currently progressing through Parliament in which a new criminal offence to crack down on dog theft is being introduced and put people who steal much loved pets behind bars for up to five years.

4.0 Performance

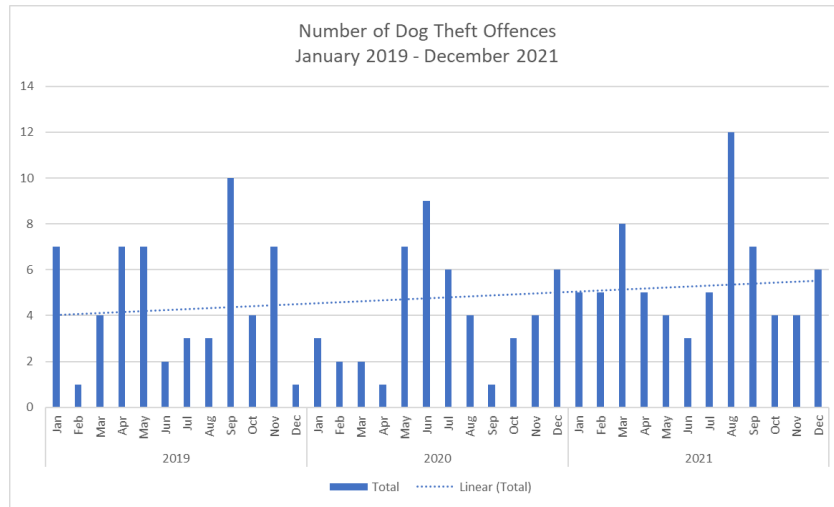
Table 1, below, shows dog thefts recorded 2019-2021, according to the offence type recorded.

Offence		# Offences			2021 vs 2020		
HMIC Crime Tree Level 2	HMIC Crime Tree Level 3	2019	2020	2021	# Diff	% Diff	Z Score
THEFT OFFENCES	ALL OTHER THEFT OFFENCES	45	41	60	19	46.3	2.69
	BURGLARY - BUSINESS AND COMMUNITY	1	1		-1	-100.0	-2.00
	BURGLARY - RESIDENTIAL	8	2	6	4	200.0	2.07
	THEFT FROM THE PERSON	1			0	-	0.00
	VEHICLE OFFENCES	1	1	1	0	0.0	0.00
	Total	56	45	67	22	48.9	2.95
ROBBERY	ROBBERY - PERSONAL			3	-3	-100.0	-3.46
DAMAGE AND ARSON OFFENCES	CRIMINAL DAMAGE			1	1	-	2.00
	Grand Total	56	48	68	20	41.7	2.64

- Trends since 2019 indicate dog theft is increasing, however there is a lot of variation from month to month throughout this period. There were 68 dog thefts in 2021 – an increase of 20 offences compared to 2020.
- Of those 68 offences, 60 were classified ‘All Other Theft Offences’, six Burglary Personal, one vehicle offence, one criminal damage.

- On average, there were 5.7 offences recorded per month in 2021 – an increase from 4.0 in 2020.

Chart 1, below, shows the number of dog thefts recorded each month 2019-2021.



There is significant variation in the number of offences recorded each month (this is shown in chart 1, above) e.g. in 2021 the most offences recorded in a single month was 12 in August whilst only three were recorded in June.

Charts 2 and 3, below, show the number of dog thefts recorded each month 2019-2021, and more specifically whether the suspect was known, and whether the offence was domestic related.

Chart 2

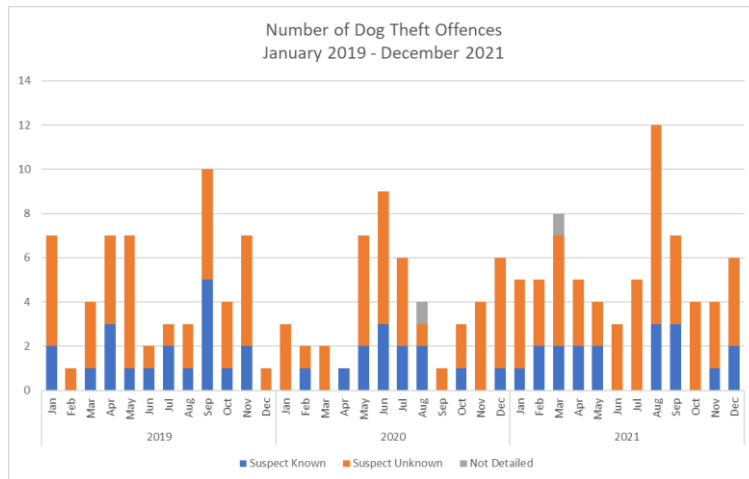
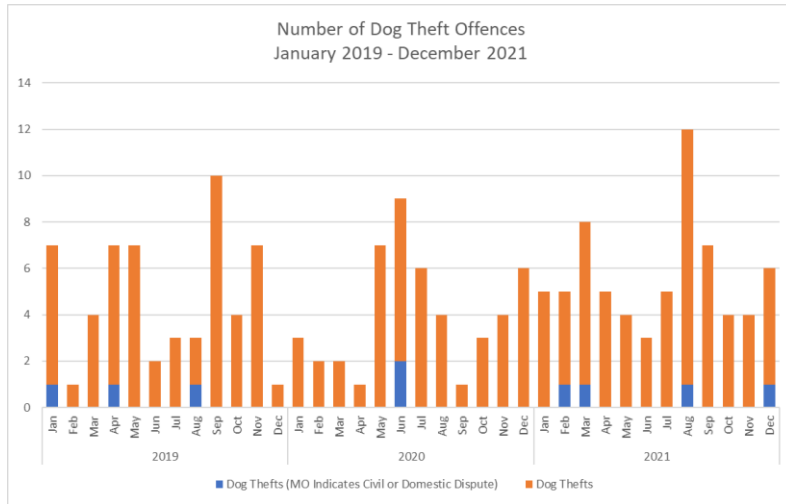


Chart 3

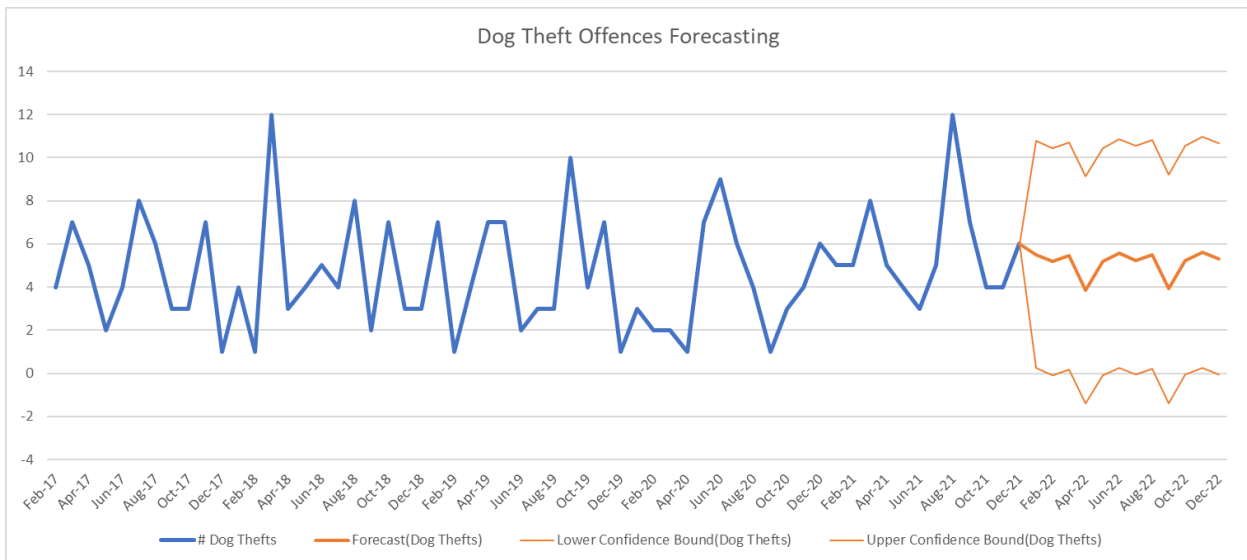


Four of the 2021 offences had Initial Modus Operandi (MO's) which indicated that the offence was a civil or domestic dispute¹.

Q - What are the drivers? Are they linked to organised crime; are they known perpetrators; is it casual/opportunist; are the dogs lost or stolen?

For 18 of the 68 offences recorded in 2021 the suspect was known to the offender and for 49 offences the suspect was unknown².

Chart 4, below, shows the forecasting of dog theft related offences for 2022.



¹ This includes situations where there is a dispute regarding the ownership of the dog such as after a relationship breakdown or incidents where the dog has been left in another person's care for a length of time and there has been a dispute regarding the return of the animal.

² There was one offence where it was not detailed if the suspect was known or unknown.

Q - What trend do you predict for the next three years?

Forecasts indicate that dog thefts will remain stable throughout 2022, although this does not take account of any changes regarding recording due to Op Reunite³ and the increased focus on Dog Theft when compared to previous years. It is anticipated that there will be a reduction of offences due to the emphasis placed on the crime type by Essex Police, better recording, and potential impact of lifting COVID19 restrictions.

National Picture

Performance data on the national picture and comparison against MSG for Essex Police has been researched however it can't easily be achieved at this time. The gateway used for most MSG comparisons reports on Crime Types so cannot achieve dog theft specific figures. However, within the HM Government Pet Theft Taskforce Policy Paper dated September 2021 the following statistics are listed:

- 7 in 10 crimes recorded in animals stolen are stolen involve dogs.
- Estimates suggest that around 2000 incidents of dog theft were recorded to Police forces across England and Wales.
- Estimated population of dogs is approx. 9.6 million dogs and therefore risk of falling victim to dog theft is low.
- Dog theft is estimated to be a low volume crime accounting for fewer than half of one percent of all theft offences, however public perception is high.
- There was a reported 3.5% increase in recorded cases of dog theft between 2019 and 2020 and this was despite a 26% decrease in Police recorded theft offences overall during the same period.

The Pet Task Force Policy paper 2021 according to research conducted by Direct Line has stated the following:

- Cumulatively, The North West, the North East, London, and the South East accounted for 52% of all dog reported theft in 2020.
- There was a 68% rise in dog thefts in the North West, and 54% in North East.
- The Metropolitan Police Service remained the force with the highest number of reported dog thefts having received 318 in 2020. West Yorkshire and Kent followed however despite these all three forces saw a decrease in the number of dogs reported stolen in 2020 compared to 2019.

³ National operation relating to dog theft

Q- How does this compare to other forces / national data?

The table below shows the top ten police forces by number of dogs stolen in 2019 and 2020⁴

Force	2019	2020
Metropolitan	328	318
West Yorkshire	167	125
Kent	118	100
Lancashire	89	111
Northumbria	49	92
Devon and Cornwall	68	78
Humberside	31	69
South Yorkshire	45	58
Durham	50	52
Essex	53	51

In contrast to the above, according to Direct Line Group, South Wales Police received just six reports of stolen dogs in 2020, a 57% fall compared to 2019 (where approximately 14 cases were recorded). In 2020, Surrey Police had 12 reports, while both Avon and Somerset Constabulary and Lincolnshire Police had just 13 each.

Data Limitations

There are several factors which cause limitations to performance data and therefore any interpretation / analysis should take place with care. Examples include:

- Lack of centrally held database.
- Incomplete information.
- Pet theft versus lost pets.
- Methods of recording.
- Recording inconsistency
- Recording of crime.
- Undercount of total number of animals stolen.

Q - Which known offenders are operating in this area and what are their profiles?

No analysis has taken place to identify the type of offender linked to dog theft (e.g. organised crime groups or casual/opportunist offenders). This is due to factors such as the low levels of solved rate, small numbers of offences and, until the introduction of Operation Reunite, confusing crime recording.

⁴ Source: [Dog theft increases by 19 per cent during lockdown - Direct Line Group](#)

To further confuse analysis, if an owner reports the dog as stolen and there is no evidence to suggest otherwise, then National Crime Recording Standards (NCRS) dictate that a crime will be recorded, although the dog could actually be lost rather than stolen. This remains the case unless additional verifiable information proves that the dog is in fact not stolen.

No analysis has taken place to profile victims / offenders as there is no identified victim / offender type due to the above factors and therefore, we are unable to identify who is at most risk victim wise and who are the common type offenders.

Public Views and Experience of Policing in Essex

SMSR - Details of the 18th quarter of results for the Essex Police Public Perceptions Survey. Since the survey began approximately 34,600 Essex residents have been interviewed (this equates to approximately 2,500 in each of the 14 Districts). Fieldwork has previously been split between interviews taking place over the phone and face to face. Due to the Coronavirus COVID-19 outbreak all interviews from Q1 20/21 onward took place over the phone. Results have been weighted to accurately represent the population size and demographics of each District.

Q- Explain the value added/impact seen by the public

In respect of the Q8j this was introduced for the first time in Q3 2021/22 and therefore no identified outcome comparison can take place however the key headline is that 64% of survey respondents feel strongly Agree/ Agree that Essex Police and the organisations they work with are dealing with dog theft. This provides reassurance that Essex Police are heading in the right direction for the PFCC performance outcome and residents of Essex.

5.0 Assessment of the Priority Areas

National Overview

From 2020 onwards there has been a sharp increase in the cost of purchasing a dog, with some breeds reported to have had up to 207% increases in price since 2019⁵. The most desirable breeds can cost more than £1,500 with some colour variations costing significantly more. This increase in the cost of a dog was partially driven by the high demand of dogs during the periods of restrictions brought in to tackle COVID-19. There was a large increase in the number of people wanting to purchase a dog and a reduction in the available supply.

In Essex the dog breed information has not been consistently recorded and, particularly when multiple dogs have been stolen in the same incident, they may be recorded on the same property record. However, a light scan of the recorded offences found several breeds which have had increase in their value since 2019 and have been stolen in Essex between 2019 and 2021. These include French Bull Dog and Cocker Spaniels. It is noteworthy that many mixed breeds which involved

⁵ [16 of The UK's Most Expensive Dog Breeds in 2021 \(countryliving.com\)](https://www.countryliving.com/uk-property/news/a38486666/16-of-the-uk-s-most-expensive-dog-breeds-in-2021/)

so called 'bully breeds'⁶ were also stolen, indicating that this is a desirable type of dog.

The high purchase price of a dog means that they are an attractive commodity to criminals. Whether that be from those selling stolen dogs, stealing puppies when visiting a breeder or fraudulently selling dogs⁷ as well as those operating illegal puppy farms. Due to the low numbers involved in Essex and limited Intelligence there is no profile available yet in respect of criminals involved.

In response to concerns by the public a national 'pet theft' taskforce was created, directed by the Prime Minister and co-ordinated by DEFRA (Department for Environment Food and Rural Affairs). The taskforce comprises of Ministers, DEFRA, Home Office, MoJ officials and operational partners including policing. In July 2021 DCC Amanda Blackman (Gwent Police) wrote to all Police forces across England and Wales and requested that Policing formulate a response to alleviate public concern and perception. Forces were requested assistance and consideration to develop a joined up National 4P's approach to improve communication, prevention, intervention, and reassurance.

Essex Police Response

In response to the request from DCC Amanda Blackman, Supt Shaun Kane took the strategic lead and implemented a working group focusing on the 4P approach within Essex which was to be led by CI Terry Balding.

Six priorities were identified to tackle dog theft in Essex with CI Balding bringing various leads across the force with the aim of achieving DCC Blackman's request using the 4P approach. The following are the priority areas identified:

- Improve data recording by adding details of stolen animals, to allow improved searching and greater data accuracy.
- Ensure representation of Essex Police at the National Police Working Group.
- Ensure consistent media messaging in line with the National strategy.
- Consider implementation of preventative measures (DNA, UV marking) to reassure dog owners.
- Respond effectively to intelligence around illegal breeding.
- Work with Operation Opal⁸ to improve the National intelligence picture.

1- Improve data recording by adding details of stolen animals, to allow improved searching and greater data accuracy.

Prior to the identified trend of dog thefts / task force there was an inconsistent approach nationally on crime recording which prevented data accuracy and conflicting approaches in respect of details obtained reference stolen dogs. These

⁶A 'Bully Breed' can be one of several dog breeds which all share similar ancestry descended from Molosser dogs. Examples include English Bulldogs, Rottweilers and Staffordshire Terriers.

⁷ Such as claiming to be a breeder when in fact operating as a puppy farm, selling a dog which doesn't exist or claiming false breed or health information about a dog being sold.

⁸ National intelligence unit which focuses on serious organised acquisitive crime

issues caused data limitations and, at times, prevented dogs being reunited with families. The Essex Police working group involved Daniel Fisher (Resolution Centre Operations Manager) and identified that dog thefts were previously only recorded as the substantive offence i.e., Theft/Burglary and with no specific difference in the recording and limited detail obtained.

The following changes were introduced within Essex because of the working group:

- Introduction nationally of operation name “Op Reunite” and within Essex this label is added to the investigation summary to provide data of recorded dog thefts.
- The property tab within the recorded crime now has more of a robust process of recording the dog which will include, if available, the microchip reference to allow for better researching.
- Victims are currently being asked to provide photos of the stolen dogs so that any distinguishing features can be identified should a dog be found without a microchip/where the microchip has been removed.
- Force Control Room (FCR) have introduced a how to guide for FCR / Resolution staff when dog theft recorded. This guide has been shared with the nationally working group.
- The introduction of a weekly report which identifies recorded dog thefts so that these can be reviewed accordingly and to ensure compliance around our processes.
- The resolution centre now registers an interest for the Force Dog theft SPOC for their awareness.

Q - How are victims being supported, and helped to prevent them becoming victims of other crime types?

- The resolution centre ensures all victims are signposted to Victim support – understanding the heartbreak the theft of a family pet causes.

2- Ensure representation of Essex Police at the National Police Working Group

Essex Police ensure consistent attendance at the National Police Working Group (CI Terry Balding in the absence of Inspector Terry Jacobs) which is chaired by Devon and Cornwall Police and held on a quarterly basis. 31 forces across England and Wales attend virtually and the standing agenda items include:

- Pet Theft task force updates
- Operation Reunite updates
- Terms of reference of the National Working Group
- Confirmation of consistent media messaging
- Appropriate preventive measures

3- Ensure consistent media messaging in line with the National strategy

Essex Police media team allocated a SPOC for the dog theft strategy within Essex – Caroline Roberts. Caroline attends the Essex working group and, when possible, the National working group and therefore understands and ensures consistent media messaging nationally. CI Balding identified and allocated a member of the Rural Engagement Team as a Dog SPOC (single point of contact) for the force. Once again, the SPOC was invited to national meetings, including within the circulation messaging nationally and linked in with the Essex Police Media Team.

4- Consider implementation of preventative measures (DNA, UV marking) to reassure dog owners

Essex Police are currently awaiting the recommended approach from the National Working Group. The group has witnessed several presentations on preventive measures but, as yet a consistent endorsed method nationally has not been recommended. Essex Police are continuing to wait until a nationally approved measure is introduced before implementing.

5- Respond effectively to intelligence around illegal breeding

Essex Rural Engagement Team and Local Policing District Community Safety Engagement Officers (CSEOs), act on intelligence and increase awareness through bespoke, appropriately balanced/messaged media campaigns. We maximise the reach of the Essex 'Dog Watch' Scheme and its membership. (There is on-going liaison with Dog Watch coordinators to ensure that new contacts are replied to as soon as possible and relevant information is being sent to them).

The Essex Police working group has ensured through Force Intelligence Bureau that global tasking has taken place in respect of dog theft, linked in with Crime Stoppers reference consideration of a campaign for dog theft and CI Balding has endorsed that the Rural Engagement Team will take on all proactive work from intelligence reports on dog theft and illegal breeding.

6- Work with Operation OPAL to improve the National intelligence picture

The Rural Engagement Team are included within all circulations from OPAL. CI Balding has appointed a dedicated dog theft officer as a point of contact to work with partners including OPAL and forces nationally tackling cross border issues. The Rural Engagement Team have also begun carrying out "dog engagement" events raising awareness of dog theft prevention, microchipping etc., and ensuring Police Intelligence Reports (PIR'S) are submitted with the Operation Reunite tag.

Q - Please provide an update on the national review of dog thefts. What action does that mean for Essex Police?

Q - How have you engaged with other agencies and animal charities to understand and prevent dog theft?

Further work completed by Essex Police

The prevention of dog theft is a key objective for Essex Police. The Local Policing Support Unit have taken ownership of the crime type with the Rural Engagement Team taking responsibility for proactive work, investigation standards and community dog events. An officer has been allocated from the team to create dog events, review all dog theft investigations and act as a SPOC in respect of dog theft and illegal breeding. The SPOC Officer offers advice to prevent theft, reduce the fear of dog thefts and promote good ownership in alignment with Dog Watch, RCSPA, local authority and Community Policing Teams. The Officer is tagged within all dog theft investigations and reviews each investigation. When appropriate the officer will make follow up enquires on behalf of the OIC for example contact the victim and obtain more details, ensure photographs are placed on the investigation, organise a press release. The officer is currently exploring dog shelters such as the Dogs Trust and establishing if Essex Police can supply a Crime Prevention leaflet with every dog they rehome and dog watch leaflet. The Rural Engagement Team are regularly exploring further opportunities to work with partners.

Q - How are you communicating success stories? Please outline any campaigns and promotional activity undertaken to promote awareness and to promote prevention

The Rural Engagement Team Achievements

Dog Events 2021:

- July – Basildon, Maldon and Dovercourt
- August – Uttlesford, Wickford, Manningtree, Chelmsford, Billericay, Walton on the Naze
- September – Tendering, Basildon
- October – Basildon, Rayne
- November – Chelmsford

Dog Events 2022:

- February – DOE Show Ulting and Grays

Essex Police have successfully progressed with Dog Watch since Summer 2021. The Dog Watch scheme has a simple aim and that is to encourage Dog Owners and walkers to be the additional eyes, ears and paws within the community and be part of the extended family.

The scheme works by encouraging members to contact Police or partners to report suspicious activity or concerns. The Watch assist by improving communication between owners / walkers and the Police who have a keen interest in helping to reduce and prevent crime.

There are currently 2,300 members which is an increase of 8% over the last 8 months. Looking ahead the Dog Watch lead – Kevin Blake (Essex Watch Liaison Lead) has booked into the “All about Dog Show” at Highlands Park, Chelmsford later this year. This will likely increase the watch membership significantly and he will talk at the event about what owners can do to prevent theft.

Q - How has Dog Watch developed over the last two years and what are the plans for future development/activity?

The watch will continue to work with the Rural Engagement Team and Local Authorities and attend smaller venues and finally the Watch scheme is in the final stages of purchasing 500 Black Dog Bones for new members. (dog collar attachment in shape of a bone labelled with Essex Police which holds waste plastic bags.)

Q - How are you communicating success stories? Please outline any campaigns and promotional activity undertaken to promote awareness and to promote prevention.

The media team at Essex Police have undertaken work to support prevention and reassure the public. An internal and external press article was released in October 2021 which explained Op Reunite and how Essex Police were addressing Dog theft with preventive advice. The Media team have significantly promoted the dog engagement events which in turn have been retweeted on Local Policing Support Unit social media accounts. Finally, the media department have issued several appeals in respect of stolen dogs which achieve significant engagement figures.

6.0 Forward look

Essex

There are no identified risks looking forward, Essex Police identified opportunities early and moved faster than several other forces nationally. There are sufficient resources in place to react to intelligence, ensure appropriate standards of investigation and through the work of Local Policing Support Unit ensure crime prevention / reassurances messages are passed to the public and consistent with the national messages. The recent confidence survey as identified within the performance section of the report suggests this has been seen by the public and as a result reassured that Essex Police are combating dog theft effectively.

Current analysis suggests crime rates will stay at current levels as COVID restrictions have lifted and potentially a significant driver for the crime type has fallen.

A weekly crime data analysis takes place in respect of Op Reunite offences which enable easy identification of crime trends / locations. Early identification of crime patterns / trends changing will allow for a proactive response from the Local Policing

Support Unit by way of deploying resources from the Rural Engagement Team, Business Crime Team, Special Constabulary, Active citizens, Dog Watch and Crimestoppers.

The Rural Engagement Team

The Team will continue to take ownership of intelligence, investigations standards and working with partners. The Team SPOC will consistently create Dog events throughout Essex and provide reassurance and crime prevention advice.

Crime Stoppers

Force Intelligence Bureau are exploring with Crime Stoppers the introduction of a targeted campaign of Dog theft, centred around intelligence on the location of stolen dogs, identification of offenders and crime prevention advice. The campaign will include social media, distribution of CS leaflets and materials and other promotions.

National Working Group

Essex Police will continue to engage with the National Group, feedback and contribute on a proactive basis, sharing good practise and learning.

Q - What other powers do you think the police need to assist work in this area?

Nationally

Introduction of new legislation – Pet Abduction

A new criminal offence to crack down on dog theft and put people who steal these much-loved pets behind bars for up to five years was set out in the Government's Kept Animals Bill on 18/11/2021 and currently within the reporting stage.

Prior to this new offence, pet theft has been treated as a loss of property to the owner. This new offence will consider the emotional distress caused to both the owner and the dog and will help judges' ability to hand down more targeted penalties and sentences for pet thieves. A provision will also be made in the Bill to extend the offence to other pets in the future, should evidence support this.

Supporting pilots of complementary methods identifying pets

Evidence has been heard by the Pet taskforce that some owners are concerned that microchipping is not sufficient for tracking stolen pets. Some police forces have decided to trial alternative identification methods due to difficulties identifying owners using microchips and photographs. Solutions are currently being piloted offering owners a complementary service to microchipping, in the form of voluntary DNA and forensic marking of pets. Police forces are running Dog DNA pilots whereby dog owner pays for a DNA kit, to swab their dog and store the dog's DNA on a database. Police can then take DNA from recovered dogs, to try to identify the owner. Forensic marking pilots are also being conducted to assess the option of UV marking of dogs, in a similar way to how property is currently marked.

The additional costs incurred from pursuing a DNA based solution are one of the factors the police will consider in deciding its approach going forward. The adoption of new techniques that may speed up the return of stolen dogs to their rightful keepers

may also potentially reduce kennelling costs. Further rollout would require an impact assessment.

Any new ID solutions would need to be complementary and additional to the existing, established system of microchipping. While DNA tests can be useful, taking swabs requires technical expertise and the sample needs to be sent away for laboratory analysis. Microchips on the other hand can be read easily and the associated keeper details can be accessed immediately. In addition, the costs for both pet owners and enforcement authorities are currently significantly higher for DNA identification than for microchip identification, and we already have an established infrastructure based on microchips, which includes international acceptance of their use on travel documents.

National Working Group

The National Group will continue to ensure and maintain a consistent approach across England and Wales and share best practice between forces.

7.0 Impact Implications

- Human rights are considered throughout policing at every stage there is no breach within the scope of preventing dog theft but it is always considered. There is no data held which demonstrates inequality in respect of suspect / offenders or victims. This is a new crime type and therefore information is still being gathered.
- Health and Safety – due to the fact there are dogs involved within the crime type including recovery, health and safety for all involved is key for Essex Police and a consistent thread throughout operational activity. Operational Policing Command is trained and experienced with a set procedure for dangerous dogs and the Rural Engagement Team are experienced and possess the right equipment for dogs either to be recovered or seized.