

Committee(s): Police Authority Board	Dated: 27 September 2022
Subject: Hajj Fraud Update	Public
Which outcomes in the City Corporation's Corporate Plan does this proposal aim to impact directly?	1- People are safe and feel safe
Does this proposal require extra revenue and/or capital spending?	N/A
If so, how much?	N/A
What is the source of Funding?	N/A
Has this Funding Source been agreed with the Chamberlain's Department?	N/A
Report of: Commissioner of Police Pol 79-22	For Information
Report author: Umer Khan, Commander Operations and Security	

Summary

This report provides a brief update on the City of London Police (CoLP) response to Hajj Fraud to address a Member query raised at a previous meeting. A verbal update was given at the July Police Authority Board in the non-public session and the Force were asked to bring this update for the public session of the September meeting.

Hajj

The Hajj is an annual Islamic pilgrimage to Mecca, Saudi Arabia, the holiest city for Muslims. Hajj is a mandatory religious duty for Muslims that must be carried out at least once in their lifetime by all adult Muslims who are physically and financially capable of undertaking the journey, and of supporting their family during their absence from home.

Pre Covid between two to three million pilgrims made the annual pilgrimage, with around ten to twenty thousand making the journey from United Kingdom.

Hajj related Fraud.

The cost of performing the Hajj is fairly significant with pilgrims saving over many years, some lifetime to make this journey. In 2022 an average package was price ranged from £7,000 to £15,000. Sadly there has been instances of fraudulent tour operators exploiting vulnerable pilgrims over the years.

City of London Police Support

Since 2012-13, as National Lead Force for Fraud, CoLP has historically conducted an annual campaign to support the prevention and response to Hajj related Fraud. With actual crimes reported at a low volume, with recognition trust and confidence to report offences together with the awareness to do being low amongst the pilgrim community, hence originally, the campaigns have centred around raising awareness to Pilgrims regarding the mis-selling of Air Travel Organisers Licence (ATOL) based packages, bad estimating of visa requirements along with overselling the accommodation and standard of travel. Many offences are trading standards offences. However, CoLP officers have undertaken campaigns as volunteers to raise awareness within the relevant communities.

In approximately 2013-16 the crime method changed to be more around fraudulent agents setting up to take bookings and then just making off with the funds leaving victims with no package and no funds.

More recently between 2019 and 2021, the Covid 19 pandemic effectively cancelled the Hajj owing to travel restrictions and lockdowns globally. This year although coming out of Covid restrictions, new restrictions brought in by the Saudi Arabian Ministry impacted travelling numbers of Pilgrims.

Activity for the Hajj and Umrah in 2023 is being planned with communications from Autumn 2022.

Further details of previous activity are in the Appendix.

Recommendation(s)

Members are asked to note the report and the planned engagement with UK pilgrims stakeholder groups ahead of Hajj in June 2023.

Main Report

Background

1. The City of London Police has historically provided support and advice to Pilgrims travelling for the Hajj since 2012-13 as National Lead Force for Fraud. Many of the offences fall within Trading Standards legislation but the Force has supported initiatives on a voluntary basis. Fuller details of some of this activity can be found in Appendix 1.

Current Position

2. Owing to the Covid 19 pandemic and lockdowns and restrictions globally during 2020-21 the Hajj was effectively cancelled owing to travel restrictions.
3. This year, whilst some travel restrictions were lifted, the Saudi Arabian Ministry introduced restrictions on the number of Pilgrims travelling to the Hajj (both domestic and international) including limiting the number of Pilgrims to 1 million and introducing various vaccination requirements. This impacted the total numbers travelling and the Force undertook some limited communication activity within the Police Service to raise awareness via for example, a video sponsored by the Association of Muslim Police.
4. Actual reports of Hajj Fraud have been historically low, with rarely more than 25¹ a year and sometimes fewer. Owing to the change in the way pilgrimage packages are booked, the response by Police and Trading Standards will need to change.
5. Further work is being planned for the Hajj and Umrah in 2023 to support awareness around crime types that may have an impact for Pilgrims.

¹ Source of data National Fraud intelligence Bureau (NFIB)

Conclusion

6. The Force in its' role as National Lead Force for Fraud is ready to support any further initiatives for the Hajj and Umrah in 2023 through existing channels and will collaborate with relevant partners such as the Council of British Hajjis, who have been great supporters, to raise awareness of the types of offences that Pilgrims may fall victim to. There is no doubt the campaign needs to change due to the new way pilgrimages are being booked and there are some ideas to engage with community groups to help set that new direction. Volunteers officers and the AMP within CoLP will again be the mainstay of this effort.
7. Commander Umer Khan will establish a Task and Finish group in the lead up to Hajj 2023 to ensure UK based pilgrim community is supported and risk of likely offences are mitigated.

Appendices

- Appendix 1 – CoLP activity to support Hajj Fraud

Contact:

Umer Khan

Commander Operations and Security

City of London Police

E: Umer.khan@cityoflondon.police.uk

Appendix 1- CoLP activity to support Hajj Fraud

2015-16 – ECD volunteer officers – Live studio interview on Islam TV – reached approximately an audience of 7 million with crime prevention advice. Interview was alongside CBH (Council of British Hajjis and Trading Standards). Search warrants took place alongside Trading Standards in London and prosecutions succeed (Trading Standards led) for a Hajj related fraudster in East London. This was also well publicised and had London area news coverage where messaging was repeated.

2016/17 –ECD volunteer officers– Training was delivered to Airport Police at main airports used by Pilgrims so that officers could help them if they had issues outbound or on their return. Islam TV ran the messages and local news. Some media interest was gained by conducting community visits in Birmingham alongside Trading Standards to check on traders. Officers visited Mosques for pilgrim briefings in the London area and delivered the crime prevention advice and advice on what to do if they found that they were victims. Award received from Association of British Hajjis for work completed. Campaign appeared on the BBC One Show and crime prevention reached 15 million viewers.

2017/18 –ECD volunteer officers with CoLP Chair of Association of Muslim Police (AMP) gave further mosque briefings attended with the CBH. Liaison with new community groups was undertaken. Attended and was a speaker at the first Hajj and Umrah All Party Parliamentary Group (APPG). Visits conducted with Trading Standards on Traders and local news targeted in London and Birmingham areas. Several speaking events with community groups to spread crime prevention messages including large CBH events with Hajj agents and airlines as well as pilgrim groups. Award from Council of British Hajjis for work completed. BBC Asian network had an interview with team and crime prevention message distributed. Association of Muslim Police set up stalls at main Hajj travel Airports to give advice to travellers leaving for Hajj. Engagement started with Licensed Hajj Operators organisation although they wished to keep engagement low key and CoLP assisted with a national study into Hajj and Umrah by the University of Liverpool.

2019/2020 –ECD volunteer officers with CoLP Chair of AMP - More work through APPG but the pandemic effectively cancelled the Hajj and Umrah. The Association of Muslim Police produced an excellent YouTube video giving the prevention advice. This is shared across as many formats as possible. Visits take place with Trading Standards and a Hajj related Fraud 'crime in action' is found and successfully prosecuted with guilty plea received in 2022 and sentencing due, with media to follow. Nominated for community award by CBH. Campaign appears in BBC Defenders. Work was completed before it was known that Hajj travel is cancelled for COVID 19 pandemic through restrictions, so the campaign was 'wound down' when that news broke.

2020/2021 –ECD volunteer officers with CoLP Chair of AMP – COVID 19 Pandemic and travel restrictions cancelled the pilgrimage for UK citizens - Sharing of the You Tube advice video continued but no pilgrims could travel in the pandemic, so contact was kept with partners but otherwise was low key.

2021/2022 –Detective Inspector Staff Office/ CoLP Chair AMP– The new Saudi Arabian travel restrictions on the Hajj meant that the mis-selling offences reduced. The crime

prevention advice is being reviewed as there is concern that there may now be straightforward fraud from criminals faking sales and simply taking money, much like an investment or everyday travel fraud. The AMP video is still being disseminated but this will need to be updated going forward. The Chair of AMP has been at the forefront of Police Hajj seminars which have helped inform Officers around the country of Hajj and Umrah and give them an overview of how to help victims and raise awareness. The AMP has seen an indirect effect of local forces independently engaging now with communities. Media is due to happen in late 2022 as the sentencing of a Hajj related fraudster is announced to raise awareness for the Hajj and Umrah in 2023.