

# County Lines – Weymouth response to protecting vulnerable people

## Inspector Barry Gosling

### Summary

#### Scanning:

Weymouth and Portland contains four of the six most deprived areas in Dorset, including Melcombe Regis which was identified as a priority location within the Vulnerable Localities Index. In response a strategic partnership was established comprising of a number of agencies and in tandem Dorset Police launched an operation to tackle increased overt drug activity. This led to the identification of a number of county lines operating in the area and coincided with a sharp increase in violent offences. In response, the police established a County Lines Team (Climate) made up of predominantly neighbourhood officers with a focus on identifying and safeguarding the most vulnerable.

#### Analysis:

In order to achieve this aim the team considered the eight components that are present when drug supply occurs and targeted the two areas that posed the greatest risk – (1) preparation location and (2) deal location. The police worked hard with partners to identify the hot-spots containing the greatest vulnerabilities and developed plans that would safeguard victims, disrupt offenders and reassure the public.

#### Response:

The Climate team was NOT established to be a drug squad focussed on offenders. The priority was to identify and protect the most vulnerable from county lines. This has led to the use of tactics such as safe and well visits carried out by the same uniform officers in order to develop trust and recognise changing levels of risk an individual is facing within their premises, aided by speaking to neighbours friends and families in order to cocoon the victim. The team will work with partner agencies in order to try and move people and if necessary evict them if it's the only means of removing them from a dangerous situation.

#### Assessment:

The activities of the team has made Weymouth and West Dorset a hostile environment for county lines to operate – in August 2018 Weymouth alone had 5 red or amber (MORILE grading) county lines operating, it is now 1. Since the Climate Team was introduced a large number of previously targeted addresses of vulnerable individuals are no longer visited by violent drug dealers. 47 children have been safeguarded as a result of the team's safe and well visits and 120 individuals directly linked to county lines have been arrested. The HMIC highlighted the value of the team and the National County Lines Coordination Centre saw the team as good practice which other Forces should seek to emulate.

## **Description**

### **Scanning:**

#### **The area and its challenges.**

Weymouth and Portland is a diverse community consisting of 80% urban and 20% rural areas with residents from both ends of the social economic scale. Four of the six most deprived areas of Dorset are within Weymouth and Portland, with the section as a whole containing 9 areas within the top 10% most deprived nationally.

Numerous sources have highlighted that within these deprived areas residents possess many of the vulnerabilities identified as making them more susceptible to exploitation, including homelessness, substance misuse, poor mental health and the low employment rate

One such ward is the Melcombe Regis area which includes the Park District and the town center. This area has come under close scrutiny by all public sector partners since the publication of the Socio-Economic, Crime and Community Safety profile of November 2013 which highlighted the area as a key priority location within the Vulnerable Localities Index (VLI). This work was conducted for the Dorset Partnership Strategic Assessment and identified this as the priority location in Dorset County.

The Melcombe Regis report highlighted a number of key concerns within the area. These included significantly higher mortality rates than is average in the country with health inequalities evident, higher crime rates for serious sexual assaults, drink and drug related crime and higher than average unemployment rates.

In 2014, a strategic partnership was set up with buy in from all key partners, including police, housing, Community Safety Partnership (CSP), Public Health and Council in order to identify the core problems within Melcombe Regis.

The Melcombe Regis ward has a significant concentration of affordable housing. Due to the location and condition of these properties the housing stock provides low cost accommodation. There are many houses of multiple occupancy (bedsit rooms with shared facilities) providing homes for individuals with complex health issues, individuals who are rehabilitating from both alcohol and or drug addictions, individuals addicted to class A drugs and those who are involved in all levels of criminality. These challenging housing and social issues have been formally recognised within the strategic assessment with all partners working together alongside the voluntary community focused on regenerating the area to achieve a more balanced population and providing individuals with the help and support they require at the time of their greatest need.

Melcombe Regis is a 'high demand/low confidence' area meaning an intensive level of policing is required, and is disproportionate to other areas in order to maintain the public confidence in Dorset Police. In tandem with the multi-agency response to tackle the root causes of drug and alcohol dependency, Dorset Police responded to the rise in overt drug activity within the locality through the

introduction of Operation Champion as a force wide priority to task resources from across the force to respond to emerging Community intelligence and information.

### **Emergence of County Lines**

This Operation led to the identification of a number of dangerous drug networks (DDN) and as the intelligence around these groups improved it could be seen that they were adopting a number of fast-changing tactics. It was estimated that 70% of these gangs were not local to the area and were responsible for importing drugs from Liverpool, Manchester and London amongst other cities through 'County Lines' networks.

A significant impact of these gangs was the deliberate targeting of vulnerable local residents (adult and children) who are drug dependent and own or rent properties. The gang members slowly integrate themselves within the area and accompany the drug users into their homes. Once there, they will remain using coercion and force to operate their drug dealing businesses from the premises and often utilising the resident to actively deal for them whilst supplying and growing their chemical dependency.

As in other parts of the country the Force saw the proliferation of 'cuckooing' tactics into other urban areas which have traditionally been perceived as relatively low-crime traditional market towns such as Dorchester and Bridport and Dorset Police recognized it as being a key risk. At one point it was identified that Weymouth alone had 141 persons known to police to have been subject to cuckooing.

The increase in drug-dealing and offences involving violence such as street robbery, grievous bodily harm, a fatal stabbing and a firearms discharge raised public anxiety considerably. Complaints from the public were received via 101 and emergency 999 calls, direct to officers from local residents at community meetings and informal engagements. Partner agencies such as housing providers, social services and those working with individuals who were drug dependent also voiced their concerns that those supplying drugs were adopting ever more violent methods in order to dominate the market. Neighbourhood Officers also began to receive contact from drug-users who had reached the end of their endurance and were no longer able to cope with their situation.

## **The Police Response.**

To combat the gang activity based around County lines in Weymouth and the impact this was having on serious violence, drug activity, vulnerability and safeguarding a dedicated team was created to target this activity in Weymouth, Portland and West Dorset in August 2018.

The aims of the team were as follows:

- Identification of vulnerable persons / addresses through intelligence, local knowledge and trust
- Implementation of appropriate safeguarding strategies coordinated with partners including housing, mental health, rehab, multi-agency risk management meetings (MARMS) which are linked to County Lines
- Targeting of County Lines and local nominal's who present greatest threat, risk and harm as identified through Operation Voltage (the process under which county lines are identified and prioritised), intelligence, and coordination with FIO's
- The gathering of intelligence relating to County Lines and associated criminal activity networks and identification of vulnerable adults/young people
- The targeting of PPOs and those involved in ongoing significant acquisitive crimes to feed drug habits and association to County Lines
- Wider engagement and prevention to ensure safeguarding and enforcement/disruption opportunities

The team, Known as the Climate Team, was predominantly drawn from neighbourhood policing in order to make best use of their engagement and problem-solving skills and comprised of:

1 x NPT Sergeant

4 x NPT PC's

2 x Patrol Officers

## **Other Stakeholders**

Being a seaside town Weymouth attracts a large number of visitors to the area and its population swells considerably during the summer months. A large number of businesses in the area are dependent on the tourist economy and can be adversely affected if the town develops a reputation for having an issue with anti-social behaviour, crime and overt drug use. Weymouth railway station is in the heart of the most deprived part of the town and is a known hot-spot for drug activity – not the image the council or local businesses would want to promote as a gateway to the town.

The team are cognisant of these concerns and together with the wider neighbourhood team will target these locations in order to disrupt drug-supply activities. This provides reassurance to the community that their concerns are being addressed.

### **Analysis:**

#### **How the Police can have the greatest impact**

In order to identify how a relatively small team could maximise their effectiveness in achieving their aims; it was necessary to consider the eight necessary components to drug supply:

- Commodity
- Dealer
- Preparation location
- Communication
- Transportation
- Deal Location
- Money/credit
- User

If any of the above components are removed then drug supply cannot take place. The 'preparation location' is one area where the police and partners can have considerable influence if legislation and information is used appropriately. It is also one of the greatest areas of risk. Homes of persons vulnerable through drug use, age, infirmity and poor mental health are targeted by county lines.

The police and partners worked hard to identify the vulnerability hot-spots. The largest concentration of these victims' addresses was within the Melcombe Regis beat area (21%). This is consistent with the higher concentration of substance misuse service users within this area (27.4%) and makes absolute business sense for the DDN's to primarily base themselves in an area with the most lucrative market, full of potential customers – not only those residing there, but those who will travel into the epi-centre of the area.

The second area of risk is the deal location – risk to the drug runners from 'taxing' where they could be subject to extreme violence and to the public who are made to feel anxious and unsafe within their own communities by witnessing open drug dealing and taking with occasional violence being used openly.

Other specialist teams within the Force are able to consider the other factors but by focussing on the preparation and deal locations the team have been able to provide very visible reassurance to the public and by identifying the addresses and individuals vulnerable to cuckooing have been able to safeguard victims and disrupt offenders.

#### **Routine Activity Theory**

In 1979 Marcus Felson and Lawrence Cohen developed the routine activity theory which stipulates three necessary conditions for crime to occur:

1. The presence of a motivated offender
2. With access to a suitable target,
3. Where there is an absence of a suitable guardian

Much of the work of the team is focussed on the second of the above factors – access to a suitable target. Many victims of cuckooing are repeat victims as the factors which identify them as vulnerable remain constant so offenders will prey on them again and again. In order to try and break this pattern the Climate team worked with partners to develop a number of tactics aimed at repelling county lines and safeguarding those within a preparation location through:

- Research - Identifying what has happened? What will motivate the individual to engage? Who else can the police work alongside to open dialogue?
- Carrying out of an initial visit – Police and partners such as housing, a community mental health or outreach worker.
- Assessment and selection of appropriate measures, depending on factors such as the level of engagement possible, the level of support required, requirement for enforcement powers such as Closure Orders, Injunctions
- Ensuring that actions are followed through and recorded

### **Thinking beyond pursue.**

Traditional policing methods have tended to concentrate on the first of the above factors – the motivated offender. While there is undoubtedly a place for pursuing those involved in drug supply it cannot, if the police are to be effective, be the only approach. It is a sad fact that those involved in organising county lines have access to a significant number of exploited people that will quickly be dispatched to replace any that are arrested and prevented from supplying for a period of time.

By identifying the cuckooing locations and being proactive in visiting them the team are able to develop relationships with the victims and gain their trust. This can result in vital intelligence being shared with police, the identification of significant safeguarding concerns which can be shared with other agencies who may be better placed to assist and risk-management plans can be agreed between the police and the victim.

As the trust between the victim and the police has developed our understanding of the issues they face on a daily basis has improved. That understanding has been further enhanced through regular meetings with other agencies such as housing, CMHT and outreach workers.

### **Previous Police Approach**

Attempts to disrupt offenders and interact with victims was previously part of daily business for the local neighbourhood policing team. They had a good awareness of the issues but because responding to the issue was one of many competing demands were not able to develop relationships with the victims that allowed trust to be developed which could then allow intelligence to be gained and meaningful safeguarding plans developed. As in many areas of policing, when a bespoke team is established to focus on a particular issue the officers knowledge and expertise in that area increases considerably to the benefit of the victims they are seeking to protect and to the wider community.

## **Response:**

The Climate team developed a bespoke plan based on the 4P pillars (Prevent, Protect, Pursue and Prepare) to deliver their key aims.

### **Prevent**

This pillar is aimed to identify and protect vulnerable persons at risks of criminal exploitation and prevent them engaging in County lines activity within West Dorset. The Climate team achieve this through:

- **Safe and well visits (cuckoo checks).** The Climate team regularly attend the home addresses of vulnerable persons to support them, deter offenders and thwart attempts by County Line networks to utilise their premises as a drug distribution point. These checks are always conducted in full uniform to reassure the vulnerable person and local communities of police action. In some cases the Climate team have agreed with the vulnerable person that they will have a key to their address and if they are met by resistance then that is a signal to enter under section 17 PACE. This tactic has delivered significant results when County Line gang members have been hiding and the vulnerable person has been too scared to call for help.
- **Poster campaigns** to raise awareness around the general geographical location that County Line networks operate in the area.
- **Community engagement** with the drug using community is key to the work of the Climate team. The drug using community is a tightly knit community with an inherent distrust of Police and authority. By gaining trust and confidence the Climate team have established a two way dialogue which allows for the early identification of new high risk County line networks, greater protection for vulnerable persons at risk of serious harm or exploitation, opportunity to gather intelligence and provide signposting for vulnerable persons to support services.
- **Hotspot policing** drug dealing locations provides reassurance to local communities, opportunity to gather intelligence and encourage reporting of crimes and incidents. This tactic also enables the Climate team to identify County Line runners who may be working under duress, identify potential cuckooed properties and continue engagement with the drug dealing community.

### **Protect**

This pillar aims to safeguard vulnerable individuals and the wider community from being drawn into County Line networks. The Climate team achieve this through:

- **Partnership working** provide enhanced sharing of information and intelligence with key partner agencies such as social services (adult and children), Community Mental Health Team and Education (including Pupil referral centres). The third sector are also key to protecting vulnerable persons as they include homeless organisations such as The Lantern project and Reach which offers support for those with drug and alcohol issues. The third sector are often able to secure or provide extra support where people fail to reach a threshold set by adult social services. Effective partnership working provides increased opportunities to safeguard vulnerable people.
- **Cocooning** is a tactic that the Climate team use to protect vulnerable persons by speaking to neighbours to raise profile of issues in area and create a virtual bubble to wrap around the vulnerable person.

- **RAG rating** vulnerable addresses. The Climate team use a system to rate the risks of exploitation to a vulnerable person at a given address. Red addresses pose the greatest risk and are visited every week, amber addresses pose less risk so have less frequent visits. This system ensures effective use of officer's time to safeguard and protect the vulnerable persons at the greatest risk of exploitation.
- **Partial closure** orders are a tactic used by the Climate team to close a property, however permit the vulnerable person to continue to live at the address. This tactic protects the vulnerable person, and the wider community from County Line gang members.

## Pursue

The Climate team work collaboratively to progress enforcement action against those who exploit vulnerable persons, seek to disrupt criminal gangs and prosecute those responsible. The Climate team achieve this through:

- **Minimum Standards of investigation** have been established between CID and the Climate team. This ensures quality investigations are completed with the greatest prospect of a conviction. CID adopt all County Line and possession with intent to supply investigations.
- **ASB powers** are always considered to deter offenders and target perpetrators of persistent ASB. Powers include successful criminal behaviour orders (CBO), Community protection warnings and notices and dispersal notices.
- **Enforcement** action is taken where vulnerable persons disengage with the Climate team and County Line networks continue operate from their address. The decision to take enforcement action is always a joint decision with key partner agencies to ensure appropriate support is available for the vulnerable person. Drugs warrant are enacted by the Force Support Group (FSG) in order to separate the Climate team. After the execution of a warrant the Climate team attempt to reengage the vulnerable person. Enforcement action is necessary to reassure communities and take a firm stance against County Lines operating in West Dorset.
- **Partnership working** with traffic, field intelligence officers, dedicated source units and regional crime teams provides the Climate team with a range of pursue options.

## Prepare

This pillar aimed to strengthen the resilience of victims and communities to mitigate the harm caused by gangs and reduce the impact of County Line networks within West Dorset. The Climate team achieve this through:

- **Facebook campaign** to update on actions taken, raise the profile of the issue, provide education and build public trust and confidence.
- **Education** provided to the public, local councillors, voluntary sector, Homewatch and Hotelwatch groups. These were achieved through public meetings, councillor briefings and community engagement events intended to raise awareness of the impact of County Lines, the signs to look out for in order to empower communities to identify vulnerability and report concerns to police.
- **County Line toolkit** created by the Climate team to share resource.
- **Local media campaigns** - BBC spotlight followed the Climate team over the summer to further raise awareness of the impact County Lines has on vulnerable victims.

Since the inception of the Climate team the operating model has needed to be flexible to adjust to various policing challenges. Resource was a significant issue as the Climate team consisted of officers



on attachments from other departments, which relied upon officers being released. This coupled with the quick turnaround of attachments at 1 month intervals meant the team were often below their preferred staffing levels which impacted on officer safety and effectiveness. This issues were partially resolved through extending the attachments to 6 months to prevent the constant need to rotate officers. This also gave officers greater opportunity to build trust and rapport with the drug using community and provided greater consistency within the team.

Protecting people at risk of harm is a core priority of the Dorset PCC Police and crime plan 2017 – 2021. Due to the risk of harm to vulnerable people from exploitation there is no exit strategy to the work of the Climate team. Since the Climate team was established however, it has worked to improve the response of our partner agencies to manage risk, protect vulnerable persons and deter County line networks. This has been achieved through education and awareness training to groups of key professionals, better information sharing and improved collaboration. As a result partner agencies are accepting greater responsibility for safeguarding and managing risk reducing demand on police resources. Through effective collaboration with partners, new and emerging threats have also been identified such as shift from vulnerable people’s addresses to hotel rooms being used as preparation locations and a growing involvement of local children being exploited through County Line networks.

**Assessment:**

In order to assess the effectiveness of the project a number of different measures have been maintained since its introduction. These have included the monitoring the number of county lines groups operating across West Dorset, the number of properties subject of regular safe and well visits, the number of arrests, the number of referrals to partner agencies which allowed them to instigate safeguarding measures, the volume of drugs and weapons seized, the number of external partners which the team have delivered education and the number of children safeguarded.

<b>August 2018 – September 2019</b>		
<b>No of County Lines graded RED on MORILE matrix</b>	AUG 2018 = 2	SEPT 2019 = 0
<b>No of County Lines graded AMBER on MORILE matrix</b>	AUG 2018 = 3	SEPT 2019 = 1
<b>Total number of persons arrested</b>	163 – 120 directly involved in county lines	
<b>Total number of safeguarded properties</b>	63 (Weymouth 36, Dorchester 17, Bridport 10)	
<b>Total number of referrals to partner agencies</b>	96	
<b>Value of drug and cash seizures</b>	In excess of £250,000	
<b>Total number of weapons seized</b>	37	
<b>Number of presentations given to partner agencies</b>	26	
<b>Number of children safeguarded</b>	47	

The impressive figures shown above can mask the significance of the individual interactions that the team have had. There is a story behind each of the properties where proactive safeguarding has taken place and be shown through a case such as John's. Using drugs since the age of 16 John started to use heroin at the age of 30 following the breakdown of his marriage. Initially his use of the drug was sporadic but after 6 months he was addicted and after a year he was unable to hold down a job and could no longer fund his drug use through lawful means. John started to sell small amounts of drugs and then, around 4 years ago, he started to allow his premises to be used by county lines dealers. Initially the dealers were friendly, some would just stay for a day but others for several days at a time and would repay him by giving him a few rocks of crack or bags of heroin. However, the relationship soon changed and became very volatile:

- In September 2015 John was assaulted in the street with his head being kicked as if it were a football and he sustained GBH level injuries.
- In September 2016 John was stripped naked and assaulted by 3 males within his home address. He again sustained GBH level injuries.
- In June 2017 John was assaulted by 3 males while in the street.
- In March 2017 John was set upon by 4 persons and struck in the head with a hammer, putting him into a coma and sustaining GBH injuries. He now has permanent brain damage, limited mobility and slurred speech.

Intelligence suggests that John was victim of further assaults including having his teeth pulled out with pliers, skin pulled away from his face and victim of a sexual assault.

In response, the team put enhanced safeguarding in place. This included very regular visits by specific officers to ensure continuity with John and to allow trust to be built up. This ensured that he gave them access to his property and allowed the officers to notice any changes in his demeanour. Cocooning tactics were carried out which included highly visible visits to neighbours, speaking to his family and friends and the leaving of posters to show that this was a property subject of police checks.

When John's behaviour failed to change and it became clear that county lines nominal were still targeting his address meaning he was likely to become a victim again if he remained in the same property; officers worked with the Housing Association in order to prepare for an eviction.

At the point it became necessary to evict John, a homeless project were ready to assist. Removing him from the preparation location has meant that there have not been any further assaults on John, despite his continued drug habit.

John's situation is one common to those who are victim of cuckooing but provides an example of how the team have been able to potentially save a person's life by using all the powers at their disposal and those of our partners by removing them from extremely dangerous locations.

### **National County Lines Coordination Centre (NCLCC) Feedback**

Dorset was the second Force in the country to receive a visit from the NCLCC. In their report they stated that:

- *"The Weymouth team shows the benefits of a dedicated resource and their approach should be used as a good practice for other forces".*

- *“The current level of proactive policing appears to be having a clear impact on disrupting lines as well as safeguarding vulnerable persons at risk of cuckooing and other exploitation.”*
- *“It is clear that the staff working on the team are knowledgeable, dedicated and tenacious. They have a superb work ethic, witnessed first-hand by NCLCC staff.”*

Following the visit officers from responsible for setting up, managing and working on the team were asked to present on the ‘Neighbourhood Policing approach to county lines in Weymouth, Portland and West Dorset’ at the National County Lines Conference.

In their 2018/19 PEEL inspection report on Dorset Police the HMICFRS stated: *“Neighbourhood teams are involved in the ongoing safeguarding of vulnerable victims, including elderly people and those with mental ill-health. The force has created a neighbourhood policing team in Weymouth that is dedicated to tackling county lines and dangerous drugs networks. The team has a dual purpose: it tackles criminal networks, and protects people who are at risk of being exploited by them. This often involves working with other agencies and partners, including housing associations, local authorities and charities, who spoke highly of the force’s contribution.”*

### **Distribution of Knowledge**

The majority of the staff on the Climate Team are not permanent and complete 3 to 6 month attachments. Some of the officers join the teams from working in towns which are not considered to have a county lines issue. We have found that the knowledge and experience gained by officers from working with vulnerable victims targeted by county lines offenders has led them to identify victims or potential victims on their return to their core posting. The attachments have also meant that patrol officers who already worked in towns with a county lines issue are now far more alive to the problem and often carry on the safe and well checks on victims they had worked with even when returning to response work.

Neighbourhood Officers in Dorchester who had gained experience on the team were able to recognise county lines operating from two properties in the town and worked with partners to protect the victims and ultimately carry out two closure orders which led to a swell of community support and thanks.

### **Contact details**

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