



## **Devon and Cornwall Police and Crime Panel**

**20<sup>th</sup> November 2020**

### **BRIEFING ON COUNTY LINES**

#### **1. Introduction**

- 1.1 As part of the work plan the Police and Crime Panel made a specific request for a report to update on the current situation in relation to drugs and County Lines.
- 1.2 County Lines' is a term used to describe crimes involving gangs and organised criminal networks moving illegal drugs around the UK. Gangs look to move their drug dealing outside of their normal operating area in order to establish themselves as the main dealers in a new area, usually a seaside town or market town outside of a big city like London. In order to establish themselves they often use violence and exploit local vulnerable people (young & old) in order to help them achieve this.
- 1.3 Gangs and networks involved in county lines are likely to target and exploit children and vulnerable adults to move and store drugs and money involved in these deals. Often gangs use coercion, intimidation and violence (including sexual violence) to force these vulnerable people to carry out criminal acts.
- 1.4 The nature of these crimes presents two main challenges for policing:
  - understanding the nature and extent of exploitation and coercion within these networks, ensuring that vulnerable victims get the help they need rather than being treated as criminals; and
  - understanding the county lines networks, which typically don't align with police force boundaries, ensuring the right collaborations are in place to prevent vulnerable people being drawn into crime, bring perpetrators to justice, and protect the public.
- 1.5 Serious and organised crime affects all our communities. We know that County Lines drug networks, driven by organised crime gangs, result in complex crimes, often hidden from public view. The perpetrators target some of the most vulnerable people in society and no single agency can resolve this problem on its own. The issues arising from County Lines networks are much wider than just policing. To tackle them we need police, businesses, local authorities, the NHS, the third sector, schools and residents to work together.



- 1.6 As a result of the increase in of these types of crime, the Home Office commissioned HMICFRS to inspect police forces' understanding of, and approach to, county lines. Particular focus was to be given to whether the vulnerability and exploitation of individuals is understood and prioritised by the police. This report is entitled Both sides of the coin: An inspection of how the police and National Crime Agency consider vulnerable people who are both victims and offenders in 'county lines' drug offending.
- 1.7 The 2018 Home Office Serious Violence Strategy defines County Lines as:

*"...gangs and organised criminal networks involved in exporting illegal drugs into one or more importing areas [within the UK], using dedicated mobile phone lines or other form of "deal line". They are likely to exploit children and vulnerable adults to move [and store] the drugs and money and they will often use coercion, intimidation, violence (including sexual violence) and weapons"*
- 1.8 Devon and Cornwall is a largely rural Force, with many coastal and market towns it is a net importer of County Lines, the majority of which originate in Merseyside, the West Midlands and London. The ongoing situation is dynamic. It changes frequently as new lines start up, existing lines are disrupted, and old lines resume their activity.
- 1.9 County Lines groups travel to the peninsula using a range of personal vehicles, hire vehicles, buses and the rail network. They will often change between methods of transport based on availability or adapt after previous Police disruption. Arterial roads such as the M5 motorway and A303/A30 are frequently used.
- 1.10 Within Devon and Cornwall most County Lines dealing takes place in coastal and market towns and cities. This is because drug users are more likely to reside in towns in a greater concentration than in rural areas. However, County Lines groups do often base themselves in more rural areas to avoid detection by Police. They may use caravan parks or short-term rental accommodation, then travel into towns and cities to conduct their activity.
- 1.11 County Lines gangs can pose a violent threat to the community, particularly where they 'cuckoo' upon vulnerable people's addresses. This describes the process of forcing local drug users and vulnerable people to house them while they conduct drug dealing activity. Violence can be experienced when County Lines groups enforce debts related to drug supply. Infrequent and low levels of violence may also occur where County Lines compete for territory and customers. Devon and Cornwall Police work closely with vulnerable communities and target those that would exploit them.
- 1.12 Rather than take risks themselves, they callously exploit children and vulnerable adults, getting them to travel across police force and regional borders to distribute drugs and collect the proceeds. Contact between dealer and user relies heavily on mobile phones. Dealers often use a dedicated phone number publicised to users. This is 'county lines' offending. It presents major challenges for the police. Criminals often use violence to enforce debts and protect territory. It causes significant harm to local communities, including knife crime. And there are clear links between County Lines and other crimes, including modern slavery and human trafficking.
- 1.13 The strategic framework and context for County Lines is detailed within:

- HM Government Drug Strategy 2017
- Serious and Organised Crime Strategy 2018
- Serious Violence Strategy 2018

1.14 The Government's *Serious and Organised Crime Strategy* (2018) provided a framework for tackling organised crime, using four themes: "Pursue, Prepare, Protect and Prevent", also known as 'the 4Ps'. The police and National Crime Agency often use this framework to tackle County Lines offending. These documents identify themes with the collective overall objectives of:

- i. Reducing demand by placing a greater emphasis on building resilience and confidence amongst young people.
- ii. Reducing supply by taking a smarter approach to restricting the supply of drugs.
- iii. Building recovery by raising an ambition for full recovery amongst user groups.
- iv. Global action taking a leading role in driving international action
- v. Preventing people from engaging in serious and organised crime
- vi. Protecting victims, organisations and systems from its harms
- vii. Prepare for when it occurs mitigating the impact.
- viii. Tackling County Lines and misuse of drugs
- ix. Early intervention and prevention
- x. Supporting communities and local partnerships
- xi. Law enforcement and the criminal justice response

1.15 The strategic threat assessment from drugs in Devon & Cornwall remains high. It acknowledges that there is a substantial impact on the local community when drug distribution gang-related violence happens in communities or when children are pulled in to act as runners. There is a high public expectation that the police will protect them and stop the violence and drug-dealing and in the last 12 months there have been murders relating to drugs, as well as rapes and serious violence. It also recognises the long-term physical, psychological and financial impact on the users of class A drugs.

1.16 Leadership for tackling County Lines offending is provided by the National Crime Agency Director of Investigations and the National Police Chiefs' Council lead for tackling gangs and knife crime. The National Crime Agency has the statutory responsibility to lead the overall law enforcement response to serious and organised crime, as part of a 'whole-system' approach involving other parts of government. The national county lines co-ordination centre was launched in September 2018. It is staffed with approximately 40 personnel from police forces, regional organised crime units and the National Crime Agency.

## 2. **Extent of the problem**

2.1 County Lines in Devon and Cornwall is a dynamic and changing landscape as groups re-organise or re-brand to avoid detection. Devon and Cornwall Police identify and

monitor these threats on a daily basis, working alongside the NCA and the Regional Organised Crime Units (ROCU) to ensure emerging risks are identified. County Lines groups active in Force come from major cities across the UK.

- 2.2 County Lines groups feature as some of the highest risk criminal groups in Force, measured against the Management of Risk in Law Enforcement (MoRiLE) scoring matrix which elected Members will be familiar with from their Community Safety Partnerships work.
- 2.3 County Lines groups make regular trips into and out of the Devon and Cornwall area to re-stock class A drugs for supply. This usually takes place on a weekly to fortnightly basis but is sometimes seen in bursts of daily activity. This is achieved using a range of personal vehicles, hire vehicles and the rail network and often County Lines groups will often change between methods of transport based on availability or the need to adapt after previous Police disruption.

### 3. **Partnership working**

- 3.1 The Devon & Cornwall Peninsula Strategic Assessment 2018/19 (PSA) compiled on behalf of the Police and Crime Commissioner by the Community Safety Partnerships (CSPs) assesses County Lines and dangerous drug networks as an increasing threat with “high risk to the public and major knowledge gaps with significant risks to partnerships”. Risks to the public include, heightened concerns in communities and increase in Organised Crime Group (OCG) activity including a rise in physical harm. In addition, there was a strong focus on drug and alcohol misuse particularly amongst the young and street attached. These assessments are based upon analytical, statistical and other analysis. Multi-agency partnership forums supported by the Community Safety Partnership have been set up across the force to agree the most effective response and preventative measures. A police specialist problem solver is linked into every Community Safety Partnership.
- 3.2 The 2019-20 PSA records that there were 17 county lines networks identified as operating across Devon, Cornwall and the Isles of Scilly in August 2019. The PSA also highlights increasing levels of partner intelligence submissions – 518 – highlighting the importance of partnership and collaboration in disrupting and pursuing the criminal gangs that operate County Lines. Star (situation, task, action, result) analysis carried out by the Peninsula Crime Analysts Network to inform the PSA highlights that increases in drug offences and possession of weapons are priority areas across all CSP areas.
- 3.3 County Lines is a priority within each of the Force areas. Each Basic Command Unit (BCU) have a proactive team whose core focus includes [is] County Lines, based primarily upon the threat, risk and harm posed and their organisational capability. They focus on disruption activity in the form of surveillance, warrants, stop checks, other overt interventions, the building of case files, the safeguarding of vulnerable individuals and addresses and liaising with local authority and housing providers, including closure orders where appropriate. The structure of operational policing responses is a matter

for the Chief Constable in law but the Commissioner has actively supported the Chief Constable in his decision to establish proactive teams in each BCU over the past [3 years] to support more targeted activity to disrupt and pursue county lines.

- 3.4 The Force are reliant on each local authority areas partnership activity as the vehicles for making an impact, such as
- Drug & Alcohol Partnership Boards
  - CSP – Drug, Alcohol & Serious Violence Priorities
  - Health and Well Being Boards – Drug, Alcohol & Serious Violence Priorities
  - Drug & Alcohol Commissioning Groups
  - Safeguarding Boards – adults and children
- 3.5 A large proportion of Serious and Organised Crime Branch activity is directed towards County Lines and other drug based Organised Crime Group's. Successful activity targeting County Lines groups are recorded through a national 'Disruption' reporting process. These may be 'pursue' focussed arrests and convictions or preventative actions such as safeguarding visits and making the Force a hostile location for groups to operate in. The majority of Devon and Cornwall Police's disruptions are made in response to County Lines and dangerous drug networks.
- 3.6 Through the funding provided by the PCC to Community Safety Partnerships a proportion of this is allocated by the CSPs to address their priority areas.
- 3.7 Examples have been highlighted as best practice by the Specialist Problem Solvers linked to each Community Safety Partnership as supporting this partnership response to the threat posed by county lines include:
- Turning Corners Programme in South Devon and Torbay;
  - Police and Plymouth City Council work closely in relation to crack house closures and ASB notices to disrupt drug supply activity, something which is repeated across the Force area.
  - Police engaged with Secondary School Head Teachers Forum which involve multiple partners from which a 'Substance Misuse in Schools Training' package has evolved in Plymouth
  - All young people entering YOT in Cornwall following a referral for drugs are enrolled in Wyze Up, an evidence based programme based on staying safe. The programme has reached over 10,000 young people.
  - An Adolescent Safety Framework has been introduced in East and Mid Devon which works alongside ASB meetings to automatically review open cases to social care which are assessed as red RAG status. This has now been rolled out across Devon.
  - South Devon parental support groups have improved information flow to identify persons or locations who pose a risk.
- 3.8 Fearless, the youth service of the Crimestoppers aimed at 11-16 year olds, is a key resource in wider partnership work to raise awareness of the risks and dangers associated with County Lines with young people in our communities. Using a youth

work approach, Fearless talks to young people about serious violence in a non-judgemental way and helps empower them to make positive, informed decisions about crime and criminality. It is tasked with increasing awareness of the dangers surrounding street crime, drugs and violence. Armed with a belief in the power of prevention and intervention, Fearless aims to help our future generations navigate a safe path to adulthood. Fearless have been working with youth groups in Cornwall, in a dedicated project with the Devon and Cornwall Police Specialist Problem Solver. Plans to roll out Fearless Awareness training via the Devon and Cornwall Volunteer Police Cadets through training workshops with a Fearless worker have been impacted by the COVID 19 restrictions but digital delivery is a priority focus for Crimestoppers over the remainder of 2020/21 as part of its partnership with the OPCC.

3.9 Devon and Cornwall Police are also part of the South West Heroin and Crack Action Area Project (HACAA):

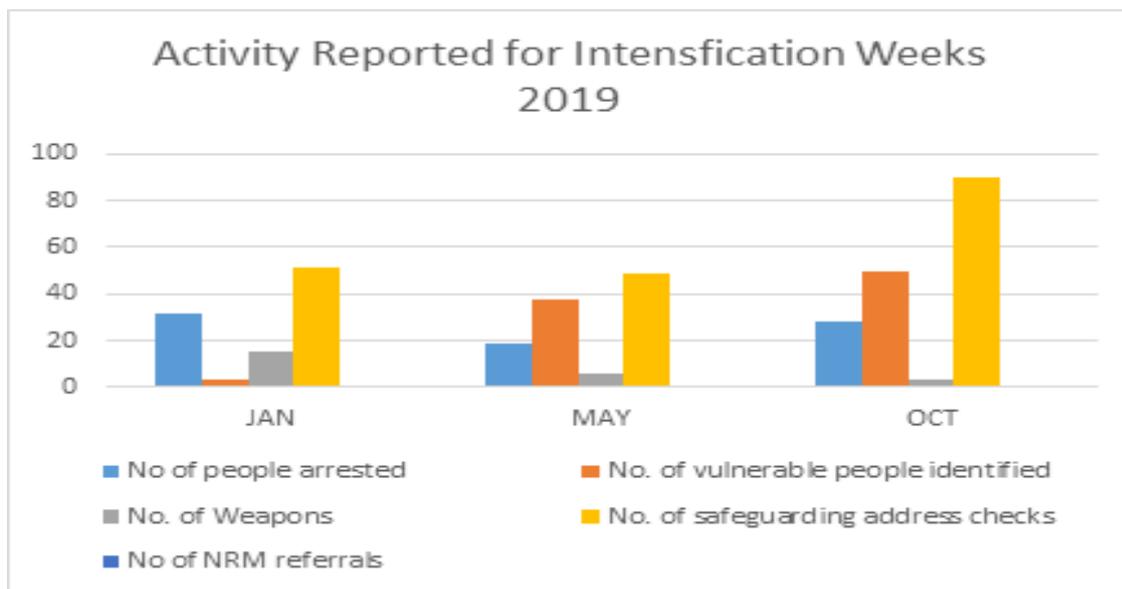
- In the Serious Violence Strategy, drug markets were identified as one of the main drivers of the recent increases in serious violence.
- The HACAA's allow local partners and communities to consider their response to a variety of public health issues, particularly around problematic heroin and crack use, the links to serious violence, and the increase in drug-related deaths.
- The South West Region secured funding of £75,000 for Devon and Cornwall Police to host & co-ordinate activity across the South West.
- This funding is being used to :
  - I. bring local partners together (e.g. local authority, health, policing and probation) to reduce heroin and crack use and offending in their area
  - II. ensure that there were coordinated pathways available to provide appropriate support to users
  - III. help forces in the region to understand the drivers of the crack increase;
  - IV. ensure that solutions were provided to areas and that local partners were committed to actions and held to account
  - V. ensure the evaluation of the impacts of different initiatives to support other areas with decisions on their local initiatives

3.10 Devon and Cornwall Police maintain strong relationships with non-Police partners across the Peninsula. They are actively involved in partnership working groups and have good channels of communication to share information, manage risk and protect the vulnerable. They also work closely with partner Forces from across the UK, as well as the NCA and other Law Enforcement Agencies to target and disrupt County Lines activity at source.

#### 4. **Recorded crime and enforcement activity**

4.1 The Office of National Statistics does not record drug trafficking separately from other drugs offences in its national crime recording.

- 4.2 Data published through the annual PSA process highlights that drug trafficking offences in Devon and Cornwall has increased from 656 in 2016/17 to 1027 in 2018/18 – with a change in the rate per 1,000 population from 0.4 to 0.6.
- 4.3 There are number tactical interventions which are deployed across Devon and Cornwall as well as considerable work taking place nationally, through the NPCC to co-ordinate the response to County Lines. As part of this national process a series of intensification weeks take place each year providing a catalyst for enhanced national collaboration. This involves not only disruption but also safeguarding visits to vulnerable persons subject to ‘cuckooing’, where their property is taken over by the drug dealer(s). As a region the South West has been particularly successful at this approach accounting for over 50% of the safeguarding visits conducted nationally during recent intensification periods.
- 4.4 A summary of the activity carried out in Devon, Cornwall and the Isles of Scilly during the three 2019 intensification weeks is included below.



- 4.5 Whilst the number of arrests has remained relatively stable, the number of weapons recovered during these periods of activity has reduced.

### **Links with other crime types**

#### *Weapons offences*

- 4.6 The Government’s 2018 Serious Violence Strategy recognises the linkages between the emergence of County Lines and increased possession and use of weapons within

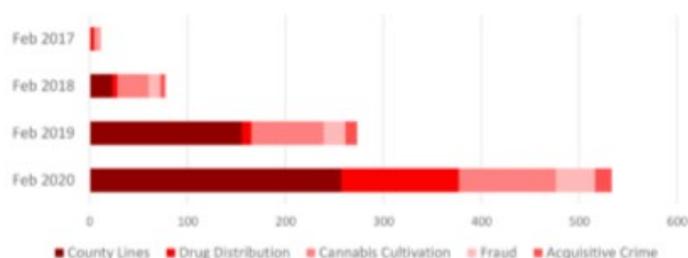
drug supply markets with gangs involved in County Lines drug trafficking considered more likely to use weapons as part of their operations than traditional local drug supply networks. There were 1081 possession of weapons offences recorded in Devon and Cornwall in 2019/20, which is an increase from 654 in 2016/17.

### Modern Slavery

- 4.8 County Lines criminality may involve the exploitation of others to participate in the transportation and supply of the drugs which can raise issues both with regards to the committing of offences under the Modern Slavery Act and also the need to consider whether individuals who have been identified or detained as part of any investigation may need to be considered as a victim of modern slavery. Identification of individuals engaged in County Lines networks as modern day slaves may impact both upon duties and obligations owned by the police to refer those individuals into the National Referral Mechanism support systems funded by the Home Office and also the potential that those individuals may have a defence to any offences they have carried out during their slavery.
- 4.9 These links between modern slavery and County Lines are complex and there is a need for policing and other criminal justice partners to continue to develop skills, capability and awareness of those links to ensure that modern slavery offences and defences are considered and utilised appropriately. As the Panel will be aware from previous reports, Devon and Cornwall Police are the host force for the national Modern Slavery Police Transformation Programme, which has been funded by the Home Office since 2017. The unit brings together a wide range of partners including the NCA, ROCUs, the Gangmasters Land Labour Licensing Authority, Immigration, CPS policing and provides national leadership in intelligence, prevention, investigation and training to increase capacity and capability to tackle modern slavery across England and Wales.
- 4.10 The latest Annual Report from the programme which relates to 2019/20<sup>1</sup> shows the prevalence of County Lines criminality in modern slavery investigations which relate to exploitation for criminal purposes across England and Wales is clear.

#### The focus of criminal exploitation investigations

County Lines, other drugs distribution and cases involving cannabis cultivation make up the vast bulk of investigations involving the criminal exploitation of victims.



<sup>1</sup> <https://policingslavery.co.uk/media/2563/ms-annual-report-2020.pdf#:~:text=The%20annual%20total%20of%20modern%20slavery%20recorded%20crimes,through%20the%20NRM%20to%20support%20a%20s45%20defence.>

- 4.11 The Annual Report further identifies that there is a continued trend of British victims, particularly minors who are identified / self-identify as victims in the National Referral Mechanism. These remain the fastest growing referral group - specifically for criminal exploitation for drug offences, often accompanied with offensive weapons and knives. The number of British victims referred remains far higher than for all other nationalities and is different to the victim profiles that tend to be observed in other areas modern slavery.
- 4.12 The Home Office have provided continuation funding to support the continuation of the programme for 2020/21 and this has been welcomed by the Commissioner and the Chief Constable. This was an important decision by the Home Office to ensure that the good work and progress made to date was not lost. The long term plans for a national response to modern slavery is actively being explored by the Home Office and the National Police Chiefs Council as part of wider work looking at all forms of exploitation. Devon and Cornwall will remain closely engaged in this work and will be seeking to ensure that modern slavery is properly reflected in any new national structures and that the Home Office continue to provide support to the national unit in Exmouth until any new arrangements are fully established.
- 4.13 In 2019/20 there was a particular focus on prevention within the modern slavery programme. In support of this the OPCC successfully applied for a small grant from the national PCC Partnership Fund to provide a series of awareness workshops for agencies and organisations who engage with homeless individuals. The decision to focus on this cohort came from discussions with anti-slavery partnership colleagues from across Devon, Cornwall and the Isles of Scilly in the light of a report by Unseen in June 2019, which highlighted how vulnerable homeless individuals and rough sleepers individuals are to this form of abuse, including exploitation into County Lines activity. The training was delivered by Unseen and was held at community venues in Plymouth, Exeter, Newquay and Torquay. It is expected that a similar funding round will be run in the final months of 2020/21 and the OPCC is exploring whether a similar intervention would be suitable to further widen awareness in this important area of exploitation risk.

#### *Serious Violence*

- 4.14 Panel members are reviewing a separate report on the Police and Crime Commissioner's approach to preventing serious violence at this meeting.
- 4.15 Panel members are aware that Devon and Cornwall Police deliver a Regional Organised Crime Unit (ROCU) in collaboration with the five other regional forces in the South West. Owing to the nature of the work undertaken by this unit, County Lines is inherent in their disruption activities. Disruption reporting is used as a method of calculating the impact of the activities of the South West ROCU in combatting serious and organised crime. A disruption is achieved when an intentional activity leads to an Organised Crime Group or individual being unable to operate at their usual level of activity, or where the risk posed by a National Control Strategy (NCS) threat or vulnerability is reduced.

- 4.16 By way of example, the South West ROCU delivered 179 disruptions in the first quarter of this financial year, which reflects a significant fall due to the operational impacts of the COVID-19 pandemic. However, despite this there were some highly successful outcomes resulting in the following key achievements:
- 41 arrests and 4 charged;
  - 13 convicted for over 28 years' incarceration;
  - 23 children safeguarded;
  - 9.5 kilos of cocaine and 11.6 kilos of cannabis seized;
  - 2 guns and 25 rounds of ammunition seized.
- 4.17 Disruption activity is also linked to the use of police powers and therefore activities such as Stop and Search. This has been an area of focus since 2016 for the PCC when the use of police powers scrutiny panel was created. Its reports are available on the OPCC website.

## 5. **How can the Police and Crime Panel Assist**

- 5.1 County Lines is a growing problem, not just in Devon and Cornwall but across the country. It is something that the police can't tackle alone. We need the support of our communities to continue to provide information about suspected drug-related offences. We're asking residents, as well as people visiting the county, to be aware of the signs of County Lines exploitation and to contact the police if they spot anything.

Signs to look for include:

- A young person going missing from school or home;
  - Meeting with unfamiliar adults and/or a change in behaviour;
  - Using drugs and alcohol;
  - Money or expensive gifts they can't account for;
  - A neighbour who has not been seen for a while;
  - More people calling at a neighbour's home – often at unsociable hours;
  - Suspicious vehicles/people attending a neighbour's home.
- 5.2 Information and intelligence from the public will help further restrict and disrupt the deal lines and enable the Police to prosecute those organising the activity, safeguard vulnerable victims caught up in the networks and continue to keep our communities safe. Panel members are encouraged to support their communities to contact police if they see anything suspicious in their neighbourhood; such as unknown characters or lots of comings and goings from houses. Reports can be made using online contact channels: [dc.police.uk/contact](https://dc.police.uk/contact). Alternatively Crimestoppers can be called anonymously on 0800 555 111 or report online: [crimestoppers-uk.org](https://crimestoppers-uk.org).

### **Contact for further information:**

#### **Frances Hughes**

Chief Executive Officer

Office of the Police and Crime Commissioner for Devon and Cornwall

[frances.hughes@devonandcornwall.pnn.police.uk](mailto:frances.hughes@devonandcornwall.pnn.police.uk)

Report prepared on 12<sup>th</sup> November 2020