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Gang activity, drug markets and managing vulnerable populations in Southend

Briefing paper for the CSP

 Feb 2018



**Gangs, County Lines and Southend.**

**Briefing paper.**

**Introduction**

This briefing paper was commissioned by the Community Safety Partnership in response to the recent Strategic Intelligence Assessment (SIA) which identified that there was significant gang activity coming in and out of Southend bringing with it problems of exploitation, criminal behaviour and violence. This activity is seriously impacting on already vulnerable populations of children and adults which needs urgent attention.

This paper is a reflection of discussions with key players within the council and its agencies but it is not designed as a comprehensive assessment of service provision or responses as there are key omissions especially when considering how Southend could benefit from being better joined to the wider Essex structures and groupings. More importantly, as many of the gangs coming into Southend originate from London Boroughs, it is essential that strong communication links are made with those local authorities and partnerships. This will allow for a better flow of intelligence, information and even joint (cross border) operations.

This review has been conducted in quick time with a view to providing a rough and ready stocktake about how Southend services are responding to the issue of gang activity and signpost how they could consolidate and co-ordinate their efforts more effectively and build on existing good practice. The paper does raise some challenges about how the work could be carried forward in 2018/19 but these would have to be tested further and adopted as a more formal Action plan.

1. **Understanding the problem**

Gang and County Lines activity in the Borough is well documented and was the subject of a Locality Review by the Home Office team in 2015. The review reported that Gangs and Organised Crime Groups are coming to Southend to supply Class A drugs to burgeoning drug market in the Borough.

However, the exact extent of the drugs market is relatively unknown as the best data we have is that of the National Drug Treatment Monitoring System (NDTMS) which is focussed on the returns of specialist drug treatment services, NHS, General Practitioners, plus there is the published police data about drug seizures. This gives a skewed view as it concentrates only on problematic drug use and there is very little known about the recreational drug use which is fuelling the demand and therefore, the supply in the Borough. Although an indicator of the size of the local drug market and its value, is perhaps reflected by the fact that Essex Police drugs operation **‘Operation Raptor’** has estimated some 15-20 active drug lines operating in the Borough over a 12-month period. This level of activity suggests a high demand, highly volatile and lucrative drug market that organised gangs are fighting to control.

In the past few years, attempts have been made by the Drug and Alcohol Service to commission a rapid needs assessment to look at Southend’s drug market but this proved too costly and cumbersome to commission and execute. There is therefore a need to look at ways that the partnership could gain a better understanding of how the dynamics of the drug market operates (the recreational drug market in particular) and its scale.

***Challenge***

***The Locality Review undertaken by the Home Office, conducted focus groups with frontline practitioners (including pharmacists) and gave a view of drug activity in the borough that, even though it was rough and ready and did not contain verifiable data, did provide qualitative data and intelligence providing insight into the local drug market. This view of street drugs activity was extremely useful and if the borough needs a real-time view of what is going on (new dangers such as bad batches of class A drugs or new drugs on the market such as Fentanyl) this could be the way to do it. It was a relatively inexpensive exercise and the partnership might want to consider undertaking these type of focus groups on a regular basis.***

***There is still a major challenge to understand the recreational drug market demand and this will need considerable thought.***

1. **Governance**

The County Lines phenomenon is pervasive in Southend and services across all 4 of the local partnerships (CSP/SAB/SCB/HWBB) are being impacted by its activities. However, these service responses tend to reactionary and piecemeal with agencies reacting to individual issues as they appear, rather than being part of a co-ordinated holistic approach to manage the problem. Therefore, although the gangs work has been instigated by the CSP, any future action could be directed through the Chief Executive’s Office so that an activity or a **Task Force** is created, whose operation is designed by the **understanding and analysis of the problem, rather than forcing the issue through existing structures**.

Tackling the problem from this angle, would be a new way of directing partnership resources, is a creative way to approach problem solving and a departure from the current governance arrangements. Although this proposal is being driven by gang activity in the Borough, it could also be an effective way to deal with any cross cutting issues that impacts on all of the partnerships, and allows for talents, skills and resources to be deployed effectively as well as ensuring collective ownership. (e.g. homelessness)

It is important that any new task group does not become a permanent fixture but should be designed to be temporary and nimble, with the ability to move strategy and operational resources as demand requires. The group should be time limited and focused on the issue until it can be managed routinely.

***Challenge***

***There is already an example of this type of work happening in the Borough with Operation Cent. It has a high level strategic group and more importantly, a multi-agency operational arm and the close feedback and flow of information from the frontline to the management board and back again, is impressive. The way this group has been created and is functioning as an effective example of good practice and its lessons should be identified, disseminated widely and built upon.***

1. **Safeguarding Adults and Safeguarding Children**

It is clear in Southend, that the statutory responsibility for safeguarding (children in particular) has galvanised action from Children’s Social Care and Police to tackle young people’s involvement with gang activity, but this is often instigated by individual casework or individuals being identified through police operations. Making links between young people’s associations through social media and their testimonies has uncovered the extent of the gang networks and has led to collective operations such as Op Cent.

***Challenge***

***However, on reflection this prompts speculation as to whether larger data sets held by police (Operation Raptor/community policing) about gang nominals could have been shared with Social Care analysts and access given to their data bases routinely much earlier.***

***This type of imaginative interrogation of police and social care systems might have identified the gang networks sooner. There are clearly sensitivities about operation intelligence and confidentiality, but senior management groups as illustrated by the Op Cent, could develop protocols to manage this with all the appropriate the data protection safeguards in place. This is clearly worth exploring***.

**3a) Safeguarding Adults: 18-25 year olds**

A significant gap in support appears for those vulnerable young people aged between 18-25. Once they turn 18, if they are not Looked After Children, then all the statutory services fall away and many are left arguably, more vulnerable and ill equipped to manage their daily lives, without the adequate resources to manage their transition into adult life. Contained within this population of young people are tomorrow’s problem street homeless, problem substance abusers, mental health patients etc. They will be a drain on future resources if no attempt is made to intervene with them early.

***Challenge***

***The Threshold for intervention for adults is high and many of these young people’s needs will not be met by the current service provision. This leaves them vulnerable not only to criminal and sexual exploitation, but also homelessness, mental health and well-being and for some, destitution. There is a need to explore what more could be done for this particular group of young people as a prevention measure, to avoid their problems and situations becoming entrenched in the future and lead to their life chances becoming seriously hampered.***

**3b) Vulnerable Adults Housing and ‘Cuckooing’**

The issue of cuckooing has been well documented nationally as a by-product of serious gang/county lines activity. There is a particular issue when the tenant is perceived as both victim and perpetrator especially if they are substance misusers and are dealing on behalf of the gang or being supplied with drugs as part of the deal.

***Challenge***

***There is work going on regionally and nationally about how local authorities and housing organisations are intervening with the gang and still attempting to protect and support the vulnerable tenant. There is some good practice going on locally with the creative use of civil tools and powers to protect tenants and move against gang members, which should be examined more fully and built on***.

1. **Enforcement**

Essex Police and the Probation Service (s) have a key role to play in identifying and monitoring gang members within their cohort of clients and as yet it is unclear how systematic the flow of information and intelligence is between the CJS agencies and the local partnerships is. There are Essex wide groupings and meetings that address these issues and Southend need to ensure it is connected into these more fully.

***Challenge***

***Gang activity in the Borough is monitored and inhibited effectively via Essex Police’s Operation Raptor and there is an excellent relationship between Raptor and local Community Safety and community policing through the pre-tasking and tasking groups. However, Social Care are often not represented at these meetings and it is suggested that this daily intelligence flow and early intervention casework would be enhanced if they were. Again, Operation Cent is an example of where this tightly managed flow of information and case management systems are very effective and lessons from this operation could be examined to see how it could be applied to other ‘specialist interests’***

1. **Prevention**

There is much good work going on in the borough to inhibit the activities of gangs and there is a need to advertise and publicise this work more widely within the local community. The community is a major resource that could be used for both information and intelligence about people and places, and could feasibly assist with inhibiting gang activity in the locality.

In addition, training on the County Lines phenomenon is needed for a wide and diverse range of personnel, across the partnership agencies. There is evidence that training is on-going in the Borough but consideration should be given to how to make training uniform in approach, widely available and its impact measured.

***Challenge***

***Regular newsletters, use of social media and utilising borough resources, such as the local children centres to hold meeting and discussion forums about gang related activity could galvanise the local community into action. Southend has a good tradition with this kind of activity with its street engagement teams and instigating the recent ‘Operation Stonegate’ community engagement work should be explored more fully.***

***In addition, the partnership might want to consider alternative training arrangements that are available to a wide range of practitioners*.**