

Operation Vulcan - reducing counterfeit sales and crime harm

Using a problem-solving approach to work with partnership agencies to address embedded criminality.

First published
20 March 2024

Updated
11 March 2025

Key details

Stage of practice	Independently evaluated
Purpose	Prevention
Topic	Retail crime Investigation Serious organised crime
Organisation	Greater Manchester Police
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Region	North West

Key details

Partners	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Police Business and commerce Community safety partnership Criminal justice (includes prisons, probation services) Education Government department Health services Local authority Private sector Voluntary/not for profit organisation
Stage of implementation	The practice is implemented.
Start date	November 2022
Scale of initiative	National
Target group	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Adults Communities Families General public Offenders Victims

Aim

Operation Vulcan was the overall Tilley Award winner in 2023.

The aim of Operation Vulcan is to reduce criminality in the area of Cheetham Hill and Strangeways. This is achieved by building a community-focused place for the future, utilising the powers and commitment of statutory and 3rd sector partners.

Using the principle of [clear, hold, build](#) (CHB) the collective partnership has targeted places selling counterfeit goods with relentless enforcement. Clearing the premises, seizing the goods, prosecuting the sellers and engaging with the landlords. Similar approaches have been made selling drugs and exploiting the vulnerable.

The community focus comes in at the hold and build stages. Working with local authority and national regeneration specialists, the community have a strong voice in the long term redevelopment of this dilapidated area of Manchester.

Intended outcome

- The management of risk in law enforcement (MoRile) score of 2842 for all aggregated criminality for this small area demonstrated the seriousness of the job at hand. The impact of the organised nature of the criminal behaviours clearly needed to be addressed.
- The intended outcome was to reduce this score by a significant amount in a short space of time, ultimately reduced to 494 in less than 8 months.
- Other measurables included the specific criminality in this area; namely the trade in counterfeit goods. At the start of the operation there were 206 identified premises concerned in the distribution of counterfeit goods. Within the 8 months zero shops remain.

Description

Operation Vulcan is a partnership response of 65 different agencies who collectively addressed embedded criminality in a specific area of Manchester. The criminality was centred around the supply of counterfeit goods, which had given the area a reputation for being the counterfeit capital of Europe. This estimated £4 billion annual trade in goods made the area look and feel neglected. Supply of drugs, abuse of immigration status, violence, and exploitation of the most vulnerable were all at unacceptable levels.

The response intended to overcome barriers was identified in the analysis. An oversight committee was established, chaired by the police, and involving law enforcement, local authorities, charities, and national bodies. This created a joined-up approach and pooling of resources to look at the task ahead. Funding of £1.2 million per year for 3 years was secured from the [Proceeds of Crime Act](#).

The intelligence barrier was significant. It became clear that partners had a wealth of information being held in silo. This could supplement the identified gaps in Greater Manchester Police (GMP) data. Information sharing agreements were established to facilitate the flow of information and allow a problem profile to be created, organising the multiple streams of data now available. This was a significant step forward as it allowed Operation Vulcan to pinpoint specific locations, mapping out the multiple layers of organised crime groups. In time this underpinned the specific [problem-orientated policing](#) plans for shops and individuals.

Planning

Before tackling a specific premises, intelligence held by partners would be shared and a plan made, discussing relevant tactics. Intellectual Property Office, Immigration Enforcement, partners from trading standards and Manchester City Council provided a really detailed, rich picture. This steered the resource commitment from each partner and provided opportunity to adapt the response quickly if the criminals' changed tactics.

Execution

Joint disruption of the criminality through activity with Manchester, Salford, and national trading standards teams. Each supported in providing expert evidence of just how dangerous these counterfeit goods were. This was vital in securing convictions of the criminals involved, whilst educating the public on the risks.

Warrants were an important tactic used by Operation Vulcan. Through intensive police and partnership action, counterfeiters were left under no illusion that this was a relentless attack on their criminal enterprises and quickly set the rules for the area.

Operation Vulcan brought a change in tactics, as never before had offenders at every level been arrested and prosecuted. This was where we learned from the past and sent a clear message to those involved.

Approaches

New and innovative approaches have been the key to success. Criminals would often lock customers in the shops when police or partners arrived. As the shops have no fire escapes, toilets or health and safety guidelines, it posed a significant risk to the customers as they were held

against their will for several hours as the criminals attempted to evade arrest. Using legislation to the operational team forced entry to the shops when criminals locked the shutters and doors. Arrests were made for false imprisonment and the shops then emptied of customers and stock which criminal groups did not anticipate.

Enforcement was just the start; charity partners such as Mustard Tree and the Booth centre were able to offer guardianship and support to those who were homeless and forced to work in the shops. Immigration provided initial support to those being exploited for their immigration status and then through the national referral mechanism.

The approach was altered and Greater Manchester Fire and Rescue (GMFRS) supported closure of premises when they had been cleared of counterfeit goods. GMFRS provided a dedicated officer who would respond and close premises within the hour. These closures meant that premises could not be reopened unless all conditions had been satisfied. Significant renovations were needed before another inspection to determine if it could be reopened. This deterred landlords involved who now leave the buildings vacant.

Following warrants, the properties were secured by rapid secure, which kept the counterfeiters out and gave legitimate landlords space to work with support from Manchester City Council and police.

In the past no work had been done to address the landlords who were involved and so they had continued to facilitate the criminal enterprise. His Majesty's Revenue and Customs (HMRC), immigration and local authorities focused and engaged with those landlords and those using the proceeds of the counterfeiting criminality. Manchester City Council reneged on the freehold agreements granted to these landlords as the operation evidenced their criminality. This is an important step in the long-term vision to create a new, vibrant area to replace what had been before.

Press campaign

Operation Vulcan includes a large media campaign involving local, national press, and social media. This is vital in passing key messages. As a shop was tackled, GMP and the partners would seek to deter potential customers by sending a clear message that:

- the goods were poor quality and unsafe
- customers risked falling victim to other criminality

- what was considered a bargain came with a history of exploitation and organised crime

Most importantly was sending a positive message to communities that GMP and partners are committed to tackling long-term issues no matter how entrenched and difficult they may seem. This fed through to the criminals as they realised this was a move against their money-making schemes. They were either going to be targeted by us or lose their customers. It was time to shut up shop.

Overall impact

An ongoing evaluation is being led by the Home Office (standard occupational classification and international criminality directorate public safety group) and is a focused study of how [clear, hold, build](#) has impacted the test areas. The evaluation looks at the impact of the intervention and measure before and after the implementation focusing on what worked as well as the costs involved. The overall MoRile score has reduced to 494. No counterfeit shops remain from the original 206 that operated in this small area.

Crime figures have reduced dramatically with violent crime being reduced by 52%, vehicle crime by 68% and the overall crime harm index by 48%. Crimes for drugs possession and trademark act offences have both risen (nearly 600% and 800% respectively) but this is due to the focused multi-agency activity that has targeted the criminals and thus provided more interventions.

The area is now being redeveloped, positively impacting the local communities. There is a now a new framework for the entire area. Already this has brought £300 million in investment and promised investment with a 10-year plan to modernise and build new housing and infrastructure.

Our strategic oversight group involves the local authority planners and some of the large-scale investors who have radical plans for the coming years. Many of the investors have said it wouldn't have been possible (financially) without the vast reduction in crime and removal of the legacy that the counterfeit capital brought to the area.

Learning

The operation followed the principles of [clear, hold, build](#) (CHB) as per the Home Office pilot. Learning from this is that there needs to be a structure to how key performance is measured. This

should include partners' measurables as well as policing. To be successful CHB cannot solely be policing led. It requires consistent and relentless activity at multiple layers using all available powers and legislation.

Support has been provided by legislation available to fire and rescue services, trading standards, immigration and HMRC. Throughout the clear stage, hold is an important element to ensure momentum. Build is often not a part the police can provide so having partners such as the local authority on board from the start is vital.

The strategic oversight group meets every quarter with additional tactical meetings taking place in between. Each meeting is governed and owned with several elements not led by policing.

Overcoming challenges

Identifying that the process for seizing and disposing of the tonnes of counterfeit goods needed refining and could provide some benefits. Learning from the private sector, such as Lighthouse Security, has been key in streamlining the disposal and re-purposing of some counterfeit clothing, de-branding and then gifting to homeless charities such as Mustard Tree.

The brands and React UK supported the operation by devising an electronic method of quantifying the loss to the economy from the counterfeiters. This, and the relationship built with these partners, immediately enhanced the investigations as they would attend warrants, providing statements at the scene evidencing the counterfeit nature of the goods.

Previously this process had taken months, but this small change sped up the criminal justice process which is now completed within weeks. Operation Vulcan worked closely with Crown Prosecution Service to expedite criminal justice outcomes and articulated the impact on communities when cases reached court. This meant that offenders were taken off the streets much quicker and for longer than ever before.

The importance of holding the location once it had been cleared of criminality was key. Initially there had been some success closing premises using civil orders. The plan was for GMP and Manchester City Council to escalate the use of orders, however, it was identified that the legislation was slow to enact, had limited impact on the criminals and was tricky to enforce.

Challenges

Challenges from the outset were getting partnership support for the operation. This had been tried (and failed) before, so articulating why this time was different was key. A launch event and transparent plan was key to success. This launch event brought together 195 attendees from the 65 agencies and an open document outlined the challenges. Getting the right information for this document was vital so engagement of key stakeholders prior to the launch was again necessary. Slido was used to pose certain questions and to get the partners to commit resources to the project there and then.

Information for someone considering a similar approach is that support from leaders is vital. The operation had the support of the chief constable, elected lead for the council and senior leaders from various partners. This created the right environment for success.

Barriers were evident from the start as there was potential resource and financial impacts for those committing to support. However, the support from leaders was the key to overcoming this. The change in partner attitudes was tangible as they understood the approach and the commitment from policing. [Clear, hold, build](#) and the structure that it provided was really useful. It was easy to get across and the partners really understood it. As we moved into the build stage, the local authority, the combined authority and housing for England began to take the lead which was the plan all along.

This was a unique environment and space. The key is to get the right policing profile and resource in place and seek support from the beginning. It is essential to move at pace but not lose people along the way.

Recommendations

Involve the local policing team from the outset as it solves the main barriers in the initial stages.

- Involve the neighbourhood team to ensure they don't feel cut out and upskill them throughout the process This shows joined up working.
- The teams will adapt as crime reduces, and you start to see the build stage. The local policing team will need to continue to manage the area in the longer term. If they haven't been engaged as part of the project from the outset, it may be tricky to encourage longer term maintenance of the area.

The new areas of high and repeat demand are done hand in hand with the local policing team and this is working effectively.

Best available evidence

Currently the [Crime Reduction Toolkit](#) does not include information on an intervention similar to clear, hold, build. However, elements of the tactical approach used in this intervention are covered by the best-available evidence on [hotspots policing](#) and [problem oriented policing](#).

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Tags

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