

Social media hub to address gang-related activity

Delivering a coordinated and dedicated online approach to address the threat, risk and harm generated by gangs.

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Key details

Does it work?	Untested – new or innovative
Focus	Prevention
Topic	Crime prevention Criminal justice Digital Drugs and alcohol Intelligence and investigation Offender management Operational policing Violence against women and girls Violence (other) Vulnerability and safeguarding
Organisation	West Midlands Police
HMICFRS report	An inspection of the West Midlands regional response to serious and organised crime

Key details

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Region	West Midlands
Partners	Police Criminal justice (includes prisons, probation services) Private sector
Stage of practice	The practice is implemented.
Completion date	January 2022
Scale of initiative	Local
Target group	Communities

Aim

To reduce the amount of harmful gang-related content on social media platforms and to use social media to assist ongoing criminal investigations relating to organised crime.

Intended outcome

- To remove harmful gang-related content from social media platforms.
- To better utilise social media when investigating criminality.

Description

The social media hub delivers a coordinated and dedicated online capability addressing the threat, risk and harm generated by gangs. The hub focuses on investigating and scanning social media websites to disrupt gang related violence and support enforcement activity. It also liaises with social media companies to remove harmful online gang content.

The hub is a dedicated resource working on social media and organised crime. It was initially funded by the Home Office but is now funded by West Midlands Police.

The hub is staffed by:

- four police officers
- one detective sergeant
- one detective inspector

The team engage with various streaming platforms and refer material directly to them for review to see if it breaches their community guidelines. The level of engagement varies across the various streaming services.

The hub reviews social media content, with the aim to get harmful content removed by the streaming platform. The hub also uses digital investigation skills to support policing investigation and interventions, by searching for evidence on the streaming platforms. For example, if intelligence suggests an individual or group are involved in criminal activity, the team can investigate their social media platforms to look for any evidence of criminal behaviour.

The team have undergone both internal training to use open source systems and external training courses to improve their digital investigative skills and have a professional qualification as digital investigators.

The hub operates as a dedicated social media hub alongside the internet intelligence and investigation (III) team. It functions across three of the four strands of the capability delivery model framework.

- The capability model has been split into overt and covert activity.
- Overt activity is further sub divided into core internet use, internet intelligence and investigations.

- This is to distinguish between ad hoc internet use and the structured, methodical approach to internet research by suitably trained professionals.

Responsibilities

- To assist the III team with social media intelligence support across West Midlands Police front line policing, including proactive and reactive investigations regarding violence and criminality.
- To identify and refer relevant gang violence online content to social media platforms for removal.
- To provide neighbourhood policing units (NPUs) with intelligence for upcoming events, unlicensed music events (UMEs) and gatherings where there is a likelihood of serious gang violence.
- To carry out digital investigations using publicly available content commissioned by NPU departments as authorised.
- To provide guidance in respect of gang related social media investigations and court presentation of social media evidence. All material is captured to an evidential standard and a package prepared which is then shared with the officer in charge of the case.

All demand coming into the team is captured, allowing analysis of demand types, commissioning teams, product requests, intelligence generated and throughput. This is both from a quantitative and qualitative standpoint.

Overall impact

- The hub has improved links with streaming platforms by having a consistent working relationship with social media sites. This has allowed for greater intervention and an increase in the removal of harmful online content.
- Having a dedicated resource for digital investigations has increased the efficiency of operational policing, by being able to provide real time intelligence to control rooms during major events and operations.
- The team being highly trained experts in social media investigation has also improved the quality of digital investigation across the entire force. For example, the hub was able to access a social media live stream to assess real time threat and risk during a party where a large group of individuals had committed significant amounts of disorder in the past.

Learning

- Since the introduction of the social media hub, there have been numerous challenges around the tasking process, governance and communication with the wider force. This led to some confusion and misunderstandings around what the hub's capability was. To overcome this, the hub now conducts regular inputs to individual teams throughout the force to share what they can do and how they can support that specific team.
- A SharePoint online form was developed to ensure that the hub was able to triage any work and that tasking could be relevant and consistent. Anyone within the force who would like to speak to or get guidance from the team must submit a request using this form.
- To ensure that the hub was working in the most appropriate way, a number of internal partners and independent advisory groups (IAGs) across West Midlands Police were consulted. In these meetings, the hub presented updates about the type of work they were engaging in and gave partners and IAG members the opportunity to ask questions. This is beneficial in improving the wider understanding of the hub's work and ensuring that it can continually improve performance.

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Tags

Digital intelligence and investigation Crime reduction