

Virtual Holding to Account Serious Acquisitive Crime

Assurance sought by the Police and Crime Commissioner from the Chief Constable

As you are aware, I have recently shared my holding to account framework which includes an element of virtual Holding to Account. The aim of the virtual Holding to Accounts is to address issues that don't fall within the remit of the thematic or performance Holding to Account meetings scheduled throughout 2019. They are not intended to generate a large amount of work.

One such issue that I believe would benefit from a virtual Holding to Account is Serious Acquisitive Crime. Serious Acquisitive Crime, Serious Organised Crime and travelling criminality have been identified as key priorities for the force, both within the Alliance Control Strategy 2018/19 and the recently published West Mercia Policing Priorities.

Over the last 12 months, I have become increasingly aware of a spate of high profile commercial burglaries and ATM thefts, targeting a range of business premises. Whilst the "M.O's" for these offences vary, all tend to employ high risk methods. Such violent means of entry to attacked premises have the potential to cause high levels of harm to members of the public and the police alike. There are also wider consequences in terms of perceptions of safety, confidence and security for the local community. I know that this issue has featured in our regularly meeting.

In light of the above, I am seeking your reassurance around the completeness of the force's response to the ongoing series of offences as referred to above. This is part of my statutory holding to account duty but will also assist in informing my conversations/reassurance with local businesses and community representatives.

In the absence of any specific reference to Serious Acquisitive Crime within the Alliance SOC Strategy, I would also appreciate an update on the force's strategy for tackling these types of offences going forward. I am particularly interested in any proactive / preventative measures that I can support through local partnership working, funding, or the existing Rural and Business Crime Officers I fund across the force.

Chief Constable's Response

Over the last 12 months, West Mercia Police has experienced a range of offences that can be categorised as 'Serious Acquisitive Crime'. This includes a broad spectrum of offending, ranging from 'Car Key' and 'Family Gold' domestic burglaries through 'Car Jackings', to commercial burglaries and ATM Thefts.

This report focusses on high profile commercial burglaries and ATM thefts. Whilst the 'M.O.'s for these offences vary, they are characterised by the use of high risk methods to cause explosions, cutting equipment and violence to effect entry, all with the potential to cause high levels of harm to members of the public and the police. It is also recognised

that these types of offences have the potential to impact on public confidence around safety and security and the ability of the police to deal effectively.

West Mercia Police recognises the threat that this offending presents:

- It is recognised in the recently published policing priorities, focussing on ‘**Safer People**’, ‘**Safer Homes**’ and ‘**Safer Roads**’, in support of the force vision of protecting people from harm.
- It is recognised that some of this offending is classed as Serious and Organised Crime, an area in which significant progress has been made in the last year, including the creation of a Force Serious and Organised Crime Strategy which will ensure local delivery of the recently launched national strategy.
- Organised Acquisitive Crime was identified as a priority for the force in its Control Strategy for 2018-19 and has been confirmed to continue as a priority in 2019-20.

The Force Response

This recognition and prioritisation of the threat enables the utilisation of a range of assets and capabilities, from Local Policing, through force level and into those regionally held within the Regional Organised Crime Unit.

The Force Intelligence Unit play a key role and are responsible for:

- Identifying offences and proactively sharing intelligence across local policing areas and to other forces, utilising strong Daily Management Meeting (DMM) structures and processes.
- Identifying emerging threat of ATM attacks and commercial burglaries and providing location specific briefings and trigger plans
- Informing the Organised Acquisitive Crime content of monthly tactical assessments at local and force level
- Establishing and disseminating comprehensive understanding of MOs
- Identifying nominals involved to be identified as ‘Organised Criminal Groups’ to support targeting and co-ordinate ownership, both within and outside of West Mercia
- External intelligence sharing through well-established partnerships with industry

This work also enables more effective local partnership activity through now established Multi-Agency Partnership arrangements known as Serious Organised Crime Action Groups (SOCJAGs), in each policing area and within the existing Community Safety Partnership (CSP) arrangements. These groups enable shared understanding and ownership to tackle Serious Organised Crime and its causes.

This work has identified a number of themes and techniques that are used and feature in West Mercia, or regionally, for each of these crime types:

ATM Thefts

- Demolition or ‘Rip Outs’ – using Plant machinery.
- ‘Cutting’ – using specialist cutting equipment

Commercial Burglaries

- Targeting of local stores, including convenience stores and petrol stations, often stealing large volumes of cigarettes and using high powered vehicles.
- Targeting of larger retail outlets. There are a variety of methods of entry but often at night and in order to steal high value electrical items which are easily removed and transported and are readily saleable within 'underground' economies due to their desirability.

Results

This focus and concerted effort has yielded some very positive results, both as a result of dynamic responses and through proactive investigation:

Example 1

A proactive investigation relating to a group identified as involved in 'Cutting' ATM Thefts within West Mercia, regionally and nationally. As a result of this operation four members of this group were arrested in the early hours on the 27th September 2018. Five members of the group have now been charged with conspiracy to commit these offences and are remanded in custody, awaiting trial. There have been no further offences of this type committed in West Mercia since this time.

Example 2

A burglary occurred on the 4th September 2018 in which approximately £40,000 of Apple products were stolen. Investigation surrounding the property stolen was shared with another police force and linked an offender to this offence. Two offenders were subsequently arrested and further property recovered linking them with this and other similar offences. As a result they have both been charged and remanded in custody, awaiting trial for conspiracy to commit burglary.

Future Proactive and Preventative Activity

As has been outlined, offending of this type has been identified as a national issue. A national strategy is being developed to support efforts to tackle the threat.

The West Mercia Police Deputy Chief Constable, Amanda Blakeman, is the National Police Chiefs Council Lead for Acquisitive Crime. She is overseeing this work which includes establishing a national co-ordinating centre for Serious Organised Acquisitive Crime. West Mercia as a result will be at the forefront of developments in response to the national threat.

It is recognised more can be done to maximise delivery against these threats through existing local partnerships and supporting arrangements to assist with threat reduction. Community Safety Partnerships will be a key element of this, along with bringing appropriate organised criminality operating in this arena and with a local footprint to the attention of our SOCJAGs. Continued development of the SOCJAG approach (including partnership chairs) will assist with this.

Further partnership aligned work includes:

- Continual awareness raising with local businesses and community representatives around:
 - Security, and Police 'Design Out' officers.
 - Vigilance to report suspicious activity.
 - With Partner such as Fire Service and Health
- The development of security activity involving crime fighting tools such as the use of 'SmartWater'
- Investment in signage for We Don't Buy Crime and Neighbourhood Watch. This has been supported by the Police and Crime Commissioner.

Promotion of these approaches and close working with the Office of the Police & Crime Commissioner would be beneficial in making further in-roads with partners and the community.

Much of the preventative activity is delivered through the 'Harm Hubs', operating in both the North and South of the force. These have been developed to include the Rural and Business Crime Officers with additional support from the officers and the Serious Crime Detective Sergeant deployed in each hub.

The recently supported signage is already starting to see preventative benefits. Likewise the use of smart-water, as supported by the PCC, is being utilised. The target hardening of locations is also a key part of our response using 'Design Out Crime Officers' to assist premise owners to identify protection measures.

We have also seen recent large scale rural crime initiatives to make areas 'hostile' to organised criminality and through Force Tasking these approaches will continue to be supported. Working with key partners on such initiatives along with targeted preventative and awareness raising publicity is key. This will sought to be continued in liaison with the Office of the PCC.