Briefing: Swift Read: Early Intervention for Reducing Organised Crime - Extending the scheme

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### Summary

First launched in Glasgow in 2013, the Serious Organised Crime Early Intervention Service from charity Action for Children secured £4.6 million in National Lottery funding in late 2019 to extend the scheme to Edinburgh, Newcastle and Cardiff over a three year period. Action for Children with police, crime and council partners will work with families and schools in communities to target vulnerable young people on the cusp of serious organised crime such as drug supply and distribution, money laundering, stealing to order and illegal enforcement.

**Briefing in full**

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Introduction to Early Intervention

Serious and organised crimes are those crimes involving one or more person; is organised, meaning that it involves control, planning and use of specialist resources; causes, or has the potential to cause, significant harm; and involves benefit to the individuals concerned, particularly financial gain.

Mid-2000s Glasgow had earned the reputation as knife-crime capital of Europe, with significant numbers of stabbings and murders, there were 39 homicides in Glasgow 2004-2005, with the number halved to 18 by 2014. The former Strathclyde force set up a task force in 2005 to deal with the growing culture of knife violence and the Violence Reduction Unit used several tactics to take young men and teenage boys away from gangs and crime. It was treated as a public health crisis, and the much-lauded and unique approach involved police working together with Glasgow City Council health, education and social work agencies to reduce the incidents. You can read more details about this work here.

In 2013 Action for Children in collaboration with Scottish Government, Police Scotland, Scottish Prison Service and Glasgow City Council Social Work Services developed a service to direct children and young people away from serious organised crime. The service works with peer mentors with past involvement in organised crime and service staff. Peer mentors approach young people to establish rapport and facilitate the work of service staff with the families of the young people. The purpose of the service is to present children and young people with an alternative way of living and provide them with the opportunities to achieve this. Of the young people who engaged with the service, 100 per cent were known to Police Scotland, 93 per cent had been involved with Social Work in the past and 43 per cent had been in secure care. All were involved or at risk of being involved in organised crime gangs, 95 per cent had a drug misuse issue, 81 per cent were distributing or selling products of organised crime activities, 27 per cent were at risk of custodial sentence or secure care, 56 per cent had addicted/incarcerated/deceased parents and 31 per cent had siblings involved in serious organised crime activities or with pro-criminal attitudes.

The Early Intervention Service has worked intensively with more than 70 people a year across Glasgow. Out of its last 49 candidates, 45 have not re-offended – including a teenager who had committed nearly 600 offences before escaping a life of crime with help from the programme.

Edinburgh has now been chosen for the first stage of a UK-wide rollout of this Early
Intervention Service. Edinburgh City Council, Police Scotland and Scottish Government will work alongside Action for Children to implement the programme in the city where mentors and youth workers will offer intensive one-to-one support, peer mentoring, education and employment training to around 80 young people across Edinburgh each year, intended to break the cycle of serious crime.

Scotland’s Serious and Organised Crime Strategy

The first Serious Organised Crime Strategy for Scotland ‘Letting Our Communities Flourish’ was published in 2009. It aimed to reduce the harm to the community caused by SOC and set out four objectives:

1. Divert: divert people, especially children/young people from taking part in or using products of SOC activities
2. Disrupt: disrupt SOC activities
3. Deter: develop measures to protect the community, business and public sector from SOC activities
4. Detect: improve capacity and coordination of intelligence to combat SOC

These strands are interconnected and use research and information sharing, as well as seeking to raise awareness and understanding of the various forms in which serious organised crime may present, in order to reduce the harm it causes. The Divert strand has a significant focus on children and young people and aims to prevent their exploitation and provide opportunities to divert them from such involvement.

Serious and organised crime often targets vulnerable individuals who, whilst they may have some value to the group, are expendable and replaceable. Children and young people are vulnerable to such exploitation and may be at risk of involvement in serious organised crime often without even realising. Young people are not always able to understand the wider implications of the situations they become involved in, it is crucial that the adults around them are able to recognise potential indicators of serious organised crime and what they can do to protect and divert young people from such a pathway.

Following Glasgow’s Success

Serious organised crime has a greater presence in socially and economically disadvantaged areas and that is why senior UK police offers are looking at Glasgow as a model of how other cities should tackle things like knife crime. Following Glasgow’s success, Northumbria Police have also established a Violence Reduction
Unit to support groups similar to Action for Children as they work to prevent serious organised crime.

**Early intervention** is a process which other areas around the UK are looking to replicate, providing support to children and young people who are at risk of poor outcomes and tackling the problems they face before they become worse and hoping to help the community as a whole. Action for Children say that early intervention can take different forms, from school-based programmes to improve children’s social and emotional skills, to mentoring schemes for young people who are vulnerable to involvement in crime.

A review of the Glasgow programme with Action for Children found that 71 per cent of young people who used the service were kept out of secure care for at least six months during involvement in the programme and that by diverting four ‘high risk’ young people from secure care, the project represented a saving of over half a million pounds for Glasgow City Council a year. **Calculated by deducting £1,562.50, the cost of providing the service for one young person for six months, from the £130,000 cost of housing a young offender in secure accommodation for the same period.**

The pioneering Glasgow project was the first of its kind in the UK to use ‘peer mentors’, many themselves former young offenders, and has been shown to be effective in offering accessible role models for teenagers who have previously resisted other types of mainstream support.

**How local authorities can implement similar systems**

UK government considers serious and organised crime to be the most **deadly national security threat** faced by the UK, and one which persistently erodes the UK economy and communities. The exploitation of children for these aims is a huge factor in this.

There are ways that local authorities can improve their systems to protect their communities for example information sharing between local partner agencies. Community safety partnerships and serious and organised crime partnerships, for example, will likely hold valuable intelligence that can aid law enforcement agencies to pursue organised crime groups and individual perpetrators. Local authorities should work with partners to further understand the pathways and vulnerability factors that may result in individuals participating in organised crime and put interventions in place.
Local authorities may have to look inwards to the total provision available to people, communities and businesses within their local area provided by the public sector, voluntary organisations and community groups to decide the best path of action for the area and level of early intervention needed versus the level of serious organised crime. Intense collaboration and consistently working together across all community partners can achieve early intervention and progress on tackling serious organised crime achieved in each area.

Falkirk Council have an internal checklist that could be used to strengthen their processes and structures against serious organised crime and the risk of corruption, which has been included in the council’s internal audit – and shared across all local authorities in Scotland.

Local authorities can also strengthen links between local services, particularly housing and social work, to help prevent exploitation of vulnerable residents, develop community resources and local policing models to support community intelligence gathering, and increased trust in police and other service providers.

It should be noted that organised crime will also adapt and attempt to exploit the ongoing Covid-19 pandemic, guidance has been issued by UK national law enforcement National Crime Agency and EU law enforcement agency Europol that organised crime groups may try to exploit the virus in areas such as cybercrime, fraud, counterfeit and substandard goods, all expected to increase. Factors that prompt changes in crime and terrorism in this case will include high demand for certain goods, protective gear and pharmaceuticals; reliance on digital technology; sale of counterfeit healthcare and equipment; and taking advantage of the disruption to services law enforcement agencies normally conduct.

Comment

Tackling serious organised crime can not be seen principally as a policing issue, there needs to be a even stronger set of partnerships across local authorities, policing, community groups and service providers in order to better identify and address vulnerability and exploitation linked to organised crime.

The success of the Action for Children early intervention measures in Glasgow has shown that peer-based support is a valued method of getting children and young people on a better path, especially in families where authorities and police are not trusted. Local authorities should look to these as methods of best practice, which are proven to work, when implementing serious and organised crime strategies.

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There are clearly going to be some delays to the start of the scheduled three year early intervention programme for Edinburgh, Newcastle and Cardiff due to the Coronavirus outbreak, but it is hoped that these cities can replicate the success of Glasgow’s early intervention and turn things around for young people who may become involved in serious and organised crime, for both the individuals and communities. In the meantime, local authorities will be aware of changes to organised crime activities that Covid-19 may bring to their areas and work with police services to address new opportunities organised crime groups may attempt to exploit.

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