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INTELLIGENCE GATHERING DURING A PANDEMIC

How did informant handlers adapt to the measures implemented during the COVID-19 pandemic, and what was the consequence on their capability to optimise intelligence from informants?

In response to the COVID-19 pandemic, the Government introduced measures (national lockdowns and regulations) restricting people's movements, their access to premises, and limitations on people's social and professional association through the application of physical distancing rules. Dr Jordan Nunan and Dr Ian Stanier investigated practitioners' perceptions of the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic on Dedicated Source Unit's (DSU) ability to elicit intelligence from informants.

THE NEED TO ADAPT

Organisational adaptation requires senior leaders to make informed decisions drawn from its corporate memory. Corporate memory and its subsequent decision-making capability are informed through peer-reviewed research, continuous professional development, problem solving and operational practices. In the context of informant management, this includes Authorising Officers (AOs) and the National Police Chiefs' Council (NPCC) leading strategic steering body for United Kingdom informant policy: the National Source Working Group (NSWG).

The pandemic offered an opportunity to accelerate organisational adaptation to address emerging challenges, including:

- Safe and secure digital information between informants and handlers
- Remote access to sensitive databases
- Electronic payments
- Enhancing the use of online communication (including recruitment and tasking).

Many of these challenges pre-dated the outbreak of COVID-19 but the pandemic brought the operational and organisational requirements into sharper focus.

There are incentives to adaptation. For example, securing a satisfactory solution to electronic payments may be organisationally beneficial. Electronic reward payments may reduce the need for physical contact and therefore reduce risks of COVID-19 transmission. The method offers opportunities to reduce informant-handler compromise while travelling to, from and at

meeting venues. Electronic payments provide a digital audit trail and offer a degree of corruption-proofing in financial transactions and speed up the reward process, which may enhance the handler and informant trust and confidence.

On the other hand, cash payments may offer an opportunity to personalise the interaction, to assess the informants' welfare and to maintain rapport, which depersonalising and clinical financial transactions may not. The audit trail of digital transactions may also risk compromise of the informant-handler relationship.

INSIGHTS THAT WILL BETTER PREPARE INFORMANT MANAGEMENT

The experiences of operators, distilled from their exposure to operating at the peak of the pandemic, are useful. They can inform the development of good organisational practices, offering opportunities for greater operational resilience. Some of the key findings from our conversations with informant handlers are listed below:

Health protection

- Access to the appropriate health protection measures (e.g., vehicle adaptation, venue selection and PPE) is needed to maintain physical meetings.
- The pandemic reinforced the fact that the physical and mental welfare of the informant is as important as the collection of intelligence.

Governance

- To ensure business continuity, operators seeking to manage risk may have to accept the 'least-worst' decision. However, with creative practice and informed leadership, risk mitigation is always possible.
- Decision inertia must be challenged, with presumed risks correctly substantiated and proactively managed.
- Policy and practice development should avoid an overly cautious approach regarding ongoing use and management of informants.

- Traditional organisational approaches to policy development need to be reviewed in the context of its ability to respond to dynamic and extreme operational events.

Innovation and technology

- Informant management needs to accelerate technology adaptation and adoption where extant practices fail to maintain operational capabilities. Technology offering clear improvements over pre-pandemic practice should be more widely adopted.
- Organisational culture needs to quickly embrace technology and new ways of working. In wider society, the pandemic acted as an accelerant in the adoption of technologies, including online virtual meetings, online purchasing, and electronic banking.

Recruitment, communication, and informant development

- Automatic cessation of recruitment efforts during a pandemic is rarely justified. A decision to recruit an informant should be on a case-by-case basis and centred on the individual circumstances.
- Where there are restrictions on traditional communication methods (face-to-face meetings) greater consideration should be given to utilising secure digital communication platforms.
- Existing recruitment strategies should be agile enough to address new types of criminality and emerging trends associated with the pandemic (i.e., counterfeit PPE, online fraud, and burglary artifice by posing as medical staff).

Tradecraft and intelligence

- The collection of intelligence during the restrictions fell significantly in terms of quantity and quality. This was commensurate with falls in overall reported crime.
- Government COVID-19 restrictions on movements has the unintended consequence of restricting traditional handler-informant meetings. In response, handlers developed their tradecraft leading to an increase in alternative methods of communication, including dead letter drops and brush contacts.
- New and innovative tradecraft practices developed during pandemic related restrictions should be captured and shared throughout the informant handling community.

- The primary purpose of the recruitment and authorisation of informants, even during a pandemic, continues to be the collection of actionable intelligence.

CONCLUSION

COVID-19 acted as an inflection point for the use and management of informants. Consequently, the response to the pandemic demanded organisational adaptation on a scale not witnessed since the enactment of the *Regulation of Investigatory Powers Act 2000*. Accordingly, future informant use needs to be capable of responding to unexpectedly extreme environments.

This critical responsibility remains a primary purpose of strategic leaders who need to quickly respond, review, and adapt existing policy and practice, by setting the direction, developing the organisation and its people and a readiness to take informed risks. This requires an acceptance that not all risks associated with informant use can be eliminated, especially as keeping the informants in play is essential.

What are the lessons to be drawn? During unexpected events and rapidly changing operating environments, it is critical that senior leaders encourage the capture, recording and access to operationally critical knowledge and experience. In the case of informant use, these include additional exploration of how practitioners may further utilise existing and new secure remote access capabilities, to reduce risk, maintain professional relationships and enhance efficiencies. Governance and policy must act as enablers to necessary change. This includes the adaptation and adoption of new practices, to ensure a measured response to perceived risks and a disposition to amend long-standing policy.

Corporate memory will enable the continued recruitment of informants during periods of national emergencies. It will assist with the maintenance of effective relationships, the collection of relevant intelligence and the delivery of community safety.

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