

"THE NICEST THIEF I'VE EVER MET"

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Scanning

In November 2013 there was a sudden increase in theft from shop offences in the Blackhill and Bridgehill areas of Consett County Durham. The offences were causing frustration to local businesses and an increased demand on police.

Researching the offences committed and the evidence gathered by attending officers it was established that a male called Vladimir Novak was responsible for 45% of the thefts and 82% of the offences occurred at Tesco Express food store.

Analysis

Vladimir Novak moved to the UK from Slovakia, he was a hardworking individual who owned his own home and was in a stable relationship with a young son. There was a breakdown in the relationship and his wife left him taking their son. At this point, his life spiralled out of control and he turned to alcohol. He lost his job, house and car leaving him without an income. He turned to crime to survive and feed his addiction. Tesco store was visited, it had 95% CCTV coverage and security aware staff, however, it had a promotional display of wine in a vulnerable position making it easy to steal.

Response

Novak was arrested for the Thefts in November 2013, and charged with five offences. Officers transported Novak home from custody and entered his flat. Novak was found to be living in squalor, with alcohol bottles all over the floor, no food in the cupboards and no lighting or heating. He was in poor health and very weak. PC Anthony Kelly revisited Novak's flat and cleared the rubbish and reinstated his gas and electric. Arranged medical help and put things in place to assist with his day to day living. In relation to Tesco Food Store, they were given crime prevention advice in relation to the placement of wine in the store.

Assessment

Vladimir Novak's offending dramatically reduced, he became sober and with the help of PC Anthony KELLY found employment. There was a marked reduction in demand on the police and an increase in community confidence as a direct result of the steps taken following Novak's arrest.

Description

Scanning

In November 2013 PC Anthony Kelly was working as a 24/7 Response Police Constable in Consett, County Durham when he noticed an increase in theft from shop offences in the Blackhill and Bridgehill area. Having

attended a number of the thefts and seeing the impact the crime was having on police demand and the affected businesses, PC Anthony Kelly decided to set himself the objective of reducing theft in the area.

Crime records confirmed eleven offences of theft from shop in the area between 1st September 2013 and 30th November 2013. Nine of the offences occurred at Tesco food store Blackhill, and the remaining two at the Spar store, Bridgehill.

Vladimir Novak was a named suspect for five of the crimes, four at Tesco food store, Blackhill, and one at the Spar store, Bridgehill. The remaining six crimes had unidentified suspects.

Analysis

To fully understand why Tesco food store Blackhill was being targeted, PC Kelly visited the store. The store had two entrances, one off the main road and one from a car park at the rear of the store. On entering the shop from the rear car park a promotional display of wine, within six feet of the automatic doors was found. This wine was in a very vulnerable position and only partially covered by CCTV. Otherwise, the store had good security, with 95% CCTV coverage. Members of staff were well trained and willing to challenge anyone stealing from the store.

On speaking with the Store Manager, he stated that the thefts were becoming a real frustration. He confirmed that he knew of Vladimir Novak and would always ask him to leave if he was seen approaching the store, but this was having little effect in preventing him re-attending. The visit to Tesco Blackhill only highlighted one problem, the poor positioning of the promotional display.

Next PC Kelly turned his attention to the suspect Vladimir Novak. Novak was located within the area intoxicated and was arrested. Once sober he was interviewed and charged with five offences. Following interview PC Kelly was transporting Vladimir to his home address. At this time Vladimir was sober and found to be very articulate and well spoken. PC Kelly asked Novak what had happened in his life leading him to the point of stealing food and alcohol from the local stores. Vladimir explained that his relationship had broken down with his partner and she had left him taking their young son. He had lost contact with them and was finding it difficult to cope, and thus turning to alcohol to ease his pain. He removed a picture of his son from his wallet and started to cry. He stated that prior to his relationship breakdown he was working full time at a local food production company and owned his own home and car, both of which had been repossessed leaving him £50,000 in debt. It was clear that Vladimir's life started a downward spiral that he was struggling to escape.

On reaching Vladimir's flat, PC Kelly asked if he could see his living conditions.

On entering Vladimir's home it was dark and cold, he had no electricity nor gas. On further inspection, the floor was littered with alcohol cans and bottles. He had no bed and was sleeping under a filthy quilt on a sofa. The flat was in a terrible state and had clearly not been cleaned for several months.

PC Kelly looked in the cupboards and there was no food to be seen. Vladimir admitted to eating from bins at the rear of the local shops.

Vladimir appeared to be very weak due to malnutrition, and admitted that he repeatedly targeted Tesco, Blackhill as it was the closest store to his home and the only one he could walk to in his current condition. He stated that he knew the CCTV would capture his crimes but he was stealing to survive and feed his alcohol addiction.

Response

PC Kelly decided that the best way to reduce crime in Blackhill and Bridgehill was to address the stock placement in Tesco, Blackhill and help Vladimir Novak get his life back on track.

PC Kelly re-visited Tesco food store and asked the manager to move the promotional display of wine away from the doors. Unfortunately, the manager stated that the suppliers pay a premium to have their product in a prominent position and he was not allowed to move them. Unsatisfied with this response, PC Kelly attended a retail crime seminar. This event hosted the heads of all the major food stores and gave police the opportunity to offer crime prevention suggestions. PC Kelly raised the issue to the security director of Tesco who immediately agreed to address the matter. As a result, the promotional display was moved to a more secure location, making any future attempts to steal much harder.

PC Kelly revisited the Tesco store and explained that he intended to help Vladimir Novak get through his difficult time, in the hope it would also help reduce his offending. The store staff were really happy with the suggestion and wanted the best for Vladimir describing him as "The nicest thief they had met".

It was clear that the real reason for the increased crime was Vladimir Novak's decline. On returning to the police station having visited Vladimir's flat, PC Kelly spoke with the shift Sergeant and got £10 from petty cash. He used this money to buy basic cleaning materials and with the help of two other officers returned to the flat and began cleaning, taking the time to remove all traces of alcohol from the address and making it a more appealing place to live. On completion of the task, PC Kelly made an agreement with Vladimir that he would help him moving forwards on the understanding that he would stop committing crime. He was given a top up of gas and electricity along with a bundle of food from the local food bank. The following day PC Kelly collected Vladimir and took him to the local doctors. On approaching the reception desk Vladimir attempted to make an appointment. Unfortunately, he was told that his earliest appointment would be in two weeks time. Concerned that Vladimir needed urgent attention PC Kelly spoke with the Practice Manager and Doctor, resulting in Vladimir being seen within one hour and referred to the local alcohol support services where he was given supplements to help with his physical condition.

Conscious that Vladimir had no form of income, and a large amount of debt PC Kelly submitted a referral to Stonham Home Group, a company that offers support to vulnerable people in the community. That same day, Vladimir was allocated a support worker who immediately made contact with the benefits agency and submitted an application for financial support.

Whilst waiting for the first benefits payment Vladimir seemed to be thriving, he continued to receive food from the food bank and had dramatically reduced his alcohol consumption.

It was now Christmas 2013 and PC Kelly and Vladimir's support worker were on leave. During this time Vladimir received notification that his welfare application had been turned down.

Vladimir panicked; he was still getting food from the food bank. The service was limited to three visits and Vladimir had received his last donation. In response to his predicament, Vladimir quickly declined, selling his kitchen equipment and started drinking heavily, spending any money he had on alcohol. He eventually went back to Tesco food store and attempted to steal some wine which resulted in him being caught and arrested.

PC Kelly re-visited Vladimir and found that he was in a terrible state. Vladimir was emotional and remorseful, stating that he could not go on anymore, and spoke of ending his life. PC Kelly reassured Vladimir that he would be supported, and contacted his support worker. She contacted the benefits agency to find out why Vladimir's financial support had been declined. She found additional identification to process the claim was required. This was sent over and Vladimir received a date for his first payment. Jacqueline then set about addressing Vladimir's £50,000 debt. She approached a debt management company who confirmed they could clear Vladimir's debt, but it would cost £750. Jacqueline was able to secure this money through a charity and Vladimir was debt free.

On his return to the police station, PC Kelly mentioned that Vladimir had sold all his kitchen equipment, and another officer on the shift suggested putting an appeal on Facebook. She created a post and within two hours a local builder had replied, stating that he was renovating a house and had fully functioning fridge and cooker that he was going to scrap. He offered them free of charge if the police could collect them. A police van was used and the items were collected and dropped off at Vladimir's flat. He was overwhelmed at the donation and began to open up about some other issues in his life. He stated that he was lonely as his family live in Slovakia and he had no network of friends in Britain. He admitted to sitting in the back of the local church once a week for some human contact.

Leaving the address PC Kelly thought about Vladimir's comments and visited the church at the end of the street. He spoke with the local priest who put him in contact with a charity called St Vincent De Paul. It was here he met a volunteer David who took time out to visit his weekly for a coffee and would make his dinner on a Sunday. David got Vladimir a bed and some other furniture for his house free of charge through charitable donations. This made Vladimir's flat feel more like a home and he really started to thrive.

As time went on Vladimir became totally sober and healthier. He spoke of his desire to start working again. PC Kelly decided to visit the food production company where Vladimir used to work to see if they were recruiting. He had a meeting with the manager and head of human resources who confirmed that they still had access to Vladimir's file. They stated that he had been a model employee and was highly motivated. They stated that prior to his decline he was going to be offered promotion. They listened to PC Kelly as he described Vladimir's predicament and they offered him a full-time position with the company on a trial basis.

Vladimir started working and he was enjoying life again. However, his road to recovery was difficult, sadly he received news from his family that his father was terminally ill with cancer and would not have long to live. Due to the fact, Vladimir was working he was in a position to pay for a flight to Slovakia to visit his father before his death.

Vladimir struggled with the death of his father, and in October 2014 he was found in his flat drunk by PC Kelly, he was surrounded by alcohol bottles. PC Kelly spoke with Vladimir's doctor and he began to receive counselling with the charity 'Talking Changes'. During the counselling process, it was also established that Vladimir was suffering from PTSD from his time in The French Foreign Legion, and was also struggling to come to terms with his sexuality.

Vladimir's employers were sympathetic to his plight and kept his position within the company. Eventually, Vladimir regained his emotional strength having completed an intensive course of counselling and returned to work.

In April 2015 Vladimir was again found drunk in his flat, this time by his support worker Jacqueline. It transpired that Vladimir has researched his ex-partner on social media and viewed pictures of his son receiving Easter eggs from his mother's new partner. Vladimir struggled to deal with this and resorted to alcohol. Luckily it was only a couple of days before he calmed and returned to work.

In December 2015 (Christmas) PC Kelly visited Vladimir's flat to find him intoxicated once again. It was becoming clear that Vladimir would struggle with his emotions around times of celebration. Sadly on this occasion, his employers would not take him back and he was once again out of work. PC Kelly re-contacted Jacqueline his support worker who had reduced his number of visits due to the fact he had been at work. Together they assisted Vladimir and arranged for a new claim for financial support to be submitted.

Due to the circumstances surrounding Vladimir's unemployment, it was difficult to secure a regular income for him and he was once again relying on food banks. Eventually he did receive payments but he was feeling like he had failed and continued to drink alcohol.

In February 2016 PC Kelly became aware that Vladimir had befriended a neighbour, Peter. They would play chess together most evenings. On one visit PC Kelly could not get a response at Vladimir's address so visited Peter to see when he had last seen his friend. Whilst speaking to Peter, he stated that Vladimir was frustrated due to the fact he couldn't find a new job and was drinking alcohol to excess. He went on to say that he had lost his bank card and that money had been taken from his account. PC Kelly commenced an investigation and on recovering the CCTV identified Vladimir as the suspect, his first offence since December 2013. PC Kelly arrested Vladimir and he was charged. On his release from Police custody, PC Kelly decided to arrange a restorative meeting with Vladimir and his neighbour Peter to highlight the impact of his crime on others. During the meeting, Peter was honest and emotional. Vladimir was moved to tears and apologised for his actions. It was clear to PC Kelly that the meeting had been a success and had the potential to make Vladimir think more about his actions in future. This appeared a significant tipping point in his recovery.

PC Kelly recognised that alcoholics who offend, do not turn their lifestyle around immediately and need longer term support. By maintaining the contact and continuing to help, he could eventually change his behaviour rather than him going into prison and, starting a repetitive cycle of arrest and incarceration.

Assessment

Following the restorative meeting, Vladimir regained his focus on improving his life and reducing the impact he was having on others. He has been sober for over eight months and started a new job as a machinist in June 2017. His flat is immaculately clean and tidy. He has bought himself a car and visited his family in Slovakia for Christmas.

He is no longer receiving benefits and at this time does not require support from any other agencies.

PC Kelly decided to commence this problem-solving approach to reduce theft from shop offences in the Blackhill and Bridgehill area of Consett, County Durham. Crime records show that over a six month period between 1st January 2014 and 30th June 2014 there were only three recorded crimes of theft from shop. The three offences occurred at Tesco food store, Blackhill, and the suspects were unidentified teenagers.

The real success is the reduction in Vladimir Novak's offending. When Vladimir Novak came to PC Kelly's attention, he was already recorded once for theft and was outstanding for a further five offences that he had committed over a one week period. It is entirely likely that he was also responsible for some of the other six thefts, as there were evidential difficulties due to lack of CCTV evidence.

Since December 2014, Vladimir has only been recorded for one further crime, the theft of money from his neighbour. Although he has struggled to beat his alcohol addiction he has been given the support to prevent this escalating and resulting in reoffending.

It is entirely likely that this approach has had an unforeseen reduction on demand for the health service, as Vladimir's alcohol consumption was beginning to have a detrimental effect on his health and would have ultimately led to time in the hospital.

Although Vladimir is doing well and longer committing crime, PC Kelly contacts him once a month via telephone to find out how he is coping, so any concerns can be addressed.