

Diesel Theft at Limerick Road Dormanstown

The Problem

This summary outlines how a large increase in diesel theft from vehicles occurred at Limerick Road in Dormanstown, Redcar. The road is an industrial area which hosts 20 businesses of which several have fleets of diesel vehicles. In March 2006 these vehicles began to be targeted for diesel theft. From March to November 2006 there was a gradual increase in the number of offences reported and the volume of fuel stolen during each offence.

Scanning/Analysis

In order to establish and understand the full scale of the problem each business was visited by police and it was apparent that there was under reporting of these offences. Police arranged a meeting for all the businesses, CCTV providers and the local authority community safety department. The businesses expressed concern about a lack of CCTV in the area and about areas of dense shrubs surrounding the compounds which they felt contributed towards the problem.

The reported offences alone between March and November 2006 (44 offences) accounted for 4.6% of all theft from vehicle offences in the district (BCU) and for 16.7% of all theft from vehicle offences in the Redcar area. Five of the offences were detected to two brothers who lived local to Limerick Road in social housing.

Response

Directed patrols in the area continued which led to the 3rd arrest of the brothers responsible. Police liaised with the local housing provider who sought possession of their property. The community safety partnership conducted a visual audit in the area and environmental changes occurred. The businesses are currently deciding whether to fund a CCTV system for the area and some of them have employed security officers. Diesel marking with a joint enforcement operation with HM Customs and Excise to target the purchasers of the stolen diesel was due to go ahead in January 2007 but was cancelled when the thefts stopped in November 2006. A business watch scheme was set up and every business signed up to it.

Assessment

Consultation with the businesses and Police crime records established that from mid November 2006 to 30th March 2007 there were only 3 further diesel theft incidents at Limerick Road, two of which were attempts where offenders were disturbed by security. Sustainable solutions have worked alongside traditional policing methods to bring about a 75 % reduction in offences.

OVERVIEW

Redcar is a coastal town in the north east of England with a population of 33,000 distributed between 6 local authority ward areas. It is a socially and economically diverse community with expanding business and residential developments situated in close proximity to areas of high unemployment, crime and deprivation.

One of these ward areas, Dormanstown, is a predominantly residential area that developed in the early 1900's to house workers from local iron and steelworks. As these industries declined so too did Dormanstown leaving a largely run-down and economically disadvantaged area consisting of private

and local authority / RSL housing. In policing terms Dormanstown features regularly as a crime and disorder hot spot with levels of crime and anti-social behavior being amongst the highest in the BCU.

On the outskirts of Dormanstown is a small industrial estate centred on Limerick Road. The area consists of 20 local businesses as well as premises belonging to the local authority and a local RSL. The estate nestles between two huge industrial complexes, Corus (formerly British Steel) and Wilton International (formerly ICI Wilton), which together dominate the local environment. Together they have been not only the economic centre for the local area but for decades also the centre for a great deal of criminal activity. Whilst such criminal activity has become a way of life for certain elements of the local community it has become an increasing issue of concern for local businesses impacting on their ability to operate and ultimately remain in the area. In turn the area has become the focus for much police activity consisting mainly of traditional policing methods such as overt and covert patrols. During 2006 one particular type of crime, namely theft of diesel appeared to

increase in prevalence within the small Limerick Road industrial estate. This not only caused concern and operational problems for local businesses but also increased demand on the police and significantly increased the overall level of crime in the BCU. Whilst traditional policing methods were yielding some success in identifying and even convicting offenders they were not leading to a reduction in the number of crimes and ultimately not providing a solution to the problem. It was clear a problem solving approach was required and that more information was needed to establish the extent and nature of the problem.

SCANNING

The Redcar and Cleveland Police analyst first identified the problem of diesel theft in September 2006 from recorded crime figures. These figures showed that whilst it was by no means a new problem the number of offences committed had begun to increase significantly. Between April and September 2006 there were 42 recorded diesel theft offences in the Limerick Road estate area alone. This accounted for 16.7% of all theft from motor vehicle offences

in Redcar and 4.6% of those offences in the BCU.

Given the small size of the affected area in a BCU covering 93 sq miles this was clearly a significant problem.

Crime figures also showed several repeat victims of this crime, they were:

- Arriva (17)
- Air Products (8)
- CIS Northern Ltd/Isotank (4)
- Jewsons (12)

However, crime figures gave only a partial picture of the problem and other questions remained unanswered, such as:

- Why were particular companies being targeted?
- How were the crimes being committed?
- Once stolen how was the diesel being disposed of by the thieves?
- How accurate were the recorded crime figures. (i.e. what was the extent of under-reporting?)

As such, additional information was gathered on:

- **The victims** – Who were they; Why, when and how were they being

targeted; what had they done to protect themselves etc.

- **The location** – What was it about the physical location that made these crimes possible / easier?
- **The offenders** – Who was committing these crimes and why; how were they disposing of the diesel; what would deter them from offending.

Other partners who had a stake in this problem were consulted. They included:

- All the businesses
- Redcar and Cleveland Borough Council
- Coast and Country Housing (RSL)
- HM Customs and Excise
- CCTV
- Northumbrian Water

ANALYSIS

The Victims

Around 20 businesses operate from the small industrial estate at Limerick

Road in Dormanstown. The analysis showed that majority of these have, at some point, become victims of other types of crime e.g. criminal damage, theft from m/v and theft of building material from compounds but on a small scale and not sufficient to include in this problem solving activity. However as indicated above, during 2006 several of them began being repeatedly targeted for the theft of diesel. Offences occurred between 7pm and 6am on all nights of the week with peaks on Sunday, Monday, Wednesday and Friday. There was no evidence that the crime was seasonal in nature as it occurred at all times of year and following a significant increase in April 2006 the number of offences remained high throughout the rest of the year.

In order to understand why this was happening each of the businesses was visited and questioned about the extent and nature of the problem as they saw it.

Businesses confirmed that there was significant under-reporting of the problem. The reasons given for this included a lack of confidence in the police's ability to do anything about the theft to the fact that they were not

claiming for any loss from insurers and therefore were not required to do so.

This confirmed the suspicion that the problem was bigger than reported figures suggested and that the theft of diesel accounted for a larger proportion of the districts crime than was first thought. It was also established that theft of diesel had been taking place for many years, albeit on a much smaller scale than it was at that time.

It was identified that the crimes were being committed during the night once the businesses had closed. Metal palisade fencing surrounded all the targeted premises. Access was usually gained into premises by damaging this perimeter fencing. Offenders would use siphoning equipment brought with them to drain fuel from vehicles before removing it in large drums. The following is a list of features identified that appear to increase the vulnerability of the victims:

- Few security features other than metal fences, which could easily be overcome with simple cutting equipment.
- Either no on-site CCTV or ineffective systems
- No security personnel at night.

- Between 5pm and 7am many businesses had no staff on the premises (this leaves offenders with a lot of freedom to work and made analysis of offence times difficult).
- Petrol caps on vehicles left insecure (this was done to prevent criminals causing damage when removing them although it only made access easier).
- Vehicles (in particular buses) left full of fuel overnight. This was done for operational reasons, i.e. it was too time-consuming to fill them before start of business. As a result many of the vehicles hold up to £250 of diesel.
- Vehicles left insecure in yards and not inside buildings due to lack of space.
- Diesel is relatively expensive. Therefore it can be a lucrative albeit physically demanding crime with a large market for illicit distribution.
- Diesel is not identifiable so even if it is recovered some time after the theft it can be impossible to trace it to an owner and therefore difficult to successfully prosecute anyone found in possession of it.

As previously alluded to, the increased frequency of this crime in 2006 was a matter for some concern to the local business community and was having significant financial and operational consequences. During October and November 2006 Arriva was losing around £1500 per week in stolen diesel. The need to refuel targeted vehicles also impacted on their ability to run buses and maintain scheduled timetables. This in turn impacts on their customers, particularly those in rural communities. All of the affected businesses suffered financially with other consequences being the need to repair damaged fences and vehicles and clean-up spilled diesel which poses a health and safety risk.

THE LOCATION

Dormanstown Industrial estate covers a small area located entirely along Limerick Road on the outskirts of Redcar. It is bordered to the north by the A1085 a busy dual carriageway trunk road and the vast Corus site. To the west is the Wilton International industrial complex whilst to the south and east can be found residential housing largely owned by the local authority / Coast

and Country housing. Much of this housing is run down with a large proportion being derelict and unoccupied.

A visual audit identified that there were overgrown bushes at the rear of all of the repeat locations. These bushes had been allowed to grow so as to screen the buildings from passing traffic however, they now provided excellent cover for offenders to move around undetected and store stolen diesel and equipment used to commit the thefts.

Limerick Road itself is lit by street lighting but is not overlooked by housing.

As a consequence, during the hours of darkness, once the businesses have closed for the day, the area becomes quite isolated. There is no external CCTV in the area.

Vehicular access can be gained to Limerick Road from both ends via either the A1085 or Broadway West. There is additional pedestrian access via a footpath that runs from Broadway West, through Limerick Road and onto the A1085. This is a secluded and unlit footpath with an adjacent stream and there is evidence and intelligence to suggest that criminals use it as entry and

egress from the estate and to deposit drums of stolen diesel for later collection.

The visual audit also identified an access point for vehicles from the A1085 to the rear of three of the repeat premises. This access was owned by Northumbrian Water and was controlled by a gate that had been allowed to fall into disrepair. As a result, offenders could drive vehicles to within close proximity of the premises and remain hidden from view behind bushes. This was the only point in the estate where access could be gained by vehicles to the rear of the premises and was of particular advantage to criminals.

THE OFFENDERS

Throughout 2006 convictions were secured against three individuals for theft of diesel from the Limerick Road area. These arrests resulted from the perpetrators actually being caught by police in the act of committing the offences. Despite these convictions the offences continued with one of the individuals being caught in the act having only been recently released from prison for the same offence.

Two of the offenders lived close to the site in RSL housing giving them ready access without the need for a vehicle. Intelligence suggested that the unknown purchasers of the stolen diesel would travel from outside Redcar in cars to collect it. Intelligence indicates that diesel theft is a lucrative crime in that 45 gallon drums could be sold for £35 each and the offenders were heroin addicts who stole to fund their habits.

There was also an easily accessible market for stolen diesel. Intelligence suggested that there was a growing network of unscrupulous fishermen and other local males were regularly buying stolen diesel for use in their own boats and vehicles. This meant that whoever stole the fuel would have little difficulty in passing it on and removing one offender would likely only leave room for another to step in.

Despite several arrests being made there remained little risk of being caught as arrests usually resulted from pre-planned operations that could not be sustained. Forensic evidence was generally limited if not non-existent due to the nature of the locations and often the report of such a crime would be recorded over the telephone by the central crime bureau with no officer

attending the site. Finally, even if individuals were convicted punishments would involve non custodial or only short custodial sentences.

ANALYSIS SUMMARY

Diesel was being stolen by persistent criminals attracted by a crime that carried relatively little risk with relatively high gain. The situation was compounded and arguably encouraged by a number of environmental factors relating to the location and the victims that made this crime a significant problem for the police and their partners. One positive aspect of the numerous factors described above is that it provided the opportunity to identify a number of responses to address the problem.

RESPONSE

The results of analysis enabled us to identify three specific objectives:

- Reduce incidents of diesel theft at Limerick Road by 80% by April 2007.
- Reduce the market for stolen diesel by targeting handlers by February 2007.
- Promote trust and confidence in the police amongst the affected

businesses by February 2007.

Success would be identified by reduced levels of recorded crime, arrests / convictions for both theft and handling stolen diesel as well as feedback from the businesses and their participation in implementing solutions. Ownership of the problem was taken by the local Neighbourhood Policing Team with assistance from the BCU Pop Co-ordinator and identified points of contact within all the partner agencies.

Having identified the objectives we were able, in consultation with partner agencies and the local businesses, to develop options and action plans under the headings of Victim, Location and Offender.

VICTIM FOCUSED RESPONSES

The layout and location of the business premises together with the factors identified during analysis highlighted the need to target harden the victims. As a result the following priority responses were developed in consultation with the companies:

- In order to address the isolated nature of the estate and build

confidence in the police a business watch scheme was set-up co-ordinated by the Redcar and Cleveland BCU Neighbourhood Watch Co-ordinator. All of the businesses in the area immediately signed-up to this scheme and there is now a two-way flow of information between the businesses and police regarding incidents in the area. This is done via telephone reporting, e-mail or through the 'Ringmaster' system.

The businesses were also given Business Watch signage to be displayed outside their premises as a crime prevention tool. These were provided by the Community Safety Partnership.

- It was identified that offenders were exploiting a particular weakness in the design of the palisade fencing to gain access to the premises. The businesses were asked to remedy this by welding certain points of their fences which had the result of making them much more difficult to breach. At least one of the companies carried out this work and they have suffered no further crime.
- The inability to identify the source /owner of stolen diesel was a particular issue. It was felt that a diesel marking system might provide

an answer to this. Liaison was carried out with HM Customs and Excise, the affected companies and the National Centre for Policing Excellence. None could provide an immediate solution however Internet research enabled us to identify a company called 'Authentix' based in York. They were able to provide options for marking diesel that could make it less attractive to steal and also uniquely identify it so that the owners of stolen diesel could be established making prosecutions more likely. This led on to arrangements with HMCE for a joint enforcement operation to target offenders and recover stolen diesel. This will be discussed in more detail later.

- Following advice one of the companies, 'Isotank', employed its own security guard. No further offences have been committed at these premises and it was their security guard who detected offenders at neighbouring premises in January 2007. Police were contacted and the offenders arrested.

Other options were explored with the businesses such as improved on-site

CCTV; not leaving fuel in vehicles overnight; placing the vehicles from all the businesses in one central location overnight to improve security and overnight security guards. However the businesses disregarded these options largely on financial and operational grounds and so the focus was on the above options.

LOCATION

The visual audit conducted by the Community Safety Partnership during the analysis stage identified a number of environmental factors that together contributed to making the area a soft target for criminals. In partnership with businesses, Redcar and Cleveland Borough Council, CCTV and Northumbrian Water the following responses were developed to make the area a more difficult place for criminals to operate.

- The local authority cut back bushes at the rear of premises. This made the buildings clearly visible and reduced the opportunity for criminals to use them to conceal their activities.
- Northumbrian Water promptly repaired their gate leading to the rear of three of the repeat victims. This prevents any vehicles being

brought near to the premises. This particularly affected traveling criminals who would be unable to conceal their vehicles nearby and thereby increased their chances of detection.

- One of the businesses is in the process of agreeing to purchase land from the local authority in order to carry out further work to improve security that the council is not in a position to undertake.
- A meeting was held between the police, local business and local authority CCTV to explore options for installing CCTV in the general area and within the business premises. This would further reduce the isolation of the area and would be a useful crime prevention measure. However it is an expensive undertaking and is still at a preliminary stage.
- Targeted police patrols were continued during identified peak times.

Attempts were made to get the local authority to install lighting and gates to the footpath used by the criminals although these have yet to be implemented.

THE OFFENDERS

Environmental changes of the sort described above take time to implement and so it was necessary that direct efforts to catch offenders must continue.

As a result the following actions were agreed.

- Continued police attention to the area commencing with a covert policing operation at one of the repeat victims involving officers from the Response and Neighbourhood Policing Teams. This led to the arrest and subsequent conviction of two local males who were caught in the act of stealing diesel. Police activity also focused on stopping vehicles travelling around the area during core times.

In addition to their arrest for this offence Coast and Country housing, following liaison with the police, evicted the males from their home.

They left the Redcar area and their offending in Dormanstown appears to have ceased.

- Consultation has been carried out with HM Customs and Excise with a view to running a joint operation targeting handlers of stolen diesel.

They have offered practical advice and assistance however at this time

the operation has been put on hold due to the success of other measures described above at reducing offences in the area. Any future operation may, in addition involve the diesel marking company who have also offered practical assistance in testing vehicles for suspected stolen fuel.

ASSESSMENT

The effectiveness of the responses can be judged against the objectives described above:

Reduce incidents of diesel theft at Limerick Road by 80%

Sustainable solutions have worked alongside traditional policing methods resulting in only 3 further offences within the target area between December and March. Security officers which were one of the responses identified, disturbed the offenders during two of these offences.

There was a 75% reduction in offences for the period November 2006 to

March 2007 (inclusive) on the previous 5 month period.

The reduction was in fact much more dramatic as it had been identified that prior to November 2006 there had been significant under-reporting of crime.

As a result of building confidence amongst the local businesses all offences were subsequently being reported (this was confirmed through direct contact with each company in February 2007 when they confirmed they were suffering no thefts and would report all offences in the future). As a result we now had a true picture of incidents in the area.

Sustainable interventions have been implemented such as bushes cut down, fencing altered, security guards employed, Business Watch scheme implemented etc. Together there is every confidence that these will serve to maintain reductions in crime. Partly as a result of its success in Limerick Road the Business Watch scheme has now been extended to several other parts of the district that have experienced other types of crime.

In order to ensure the continued success of the initiatives the problem owner

with the assistance of district analysts continues to monitor recorded crime in the area and information from Business Watch is acted upon.

Reduce the market for stolen diesel

This objective was not achieved, mainly as a result of the effectiveness of other responses in tackling the problem. The effectiveness of any efforts to target handlers of stolen diesel depends on our ability to positively identify the fuel found in their possession. Since it was no longer being stolen there was little sense in marking it. However as a result of the contacts that have now been established with HMCE and 'Authentix' we are in position to implement diesel marking and run an enforcement operation should the need arise. This can be done at short notice and at any location.

Promote trust and confidence in the police amongst the businesses.

Prior to our intervention in this problem we had limited understanding of the needs and expectations of this particular business community. However as a result of working closely with them we have been able to develop genuine trust and understanding. They appreciate that all the agencies involved are

working to reduce crime in the area and as a result they are confident enough to report all incidents and act on advice given, e.g. repair fencing, employ security etc. The continued full participation in the Business Watch scheme is evidence of this.

Conclusion

Diesel theft has not traditionally been regarded as core crime and not given a high priority when committing time and resources. Our experience of this problem has given us a greater understanding of the crime, the people involved, what factors influence it and the impact it can have on recorded crime figures. It has also enabled us to develop solutions to the problem, which, although not all implemented here, can and will be used should the problem re-emerges in the same location or elsewhere. Despite the fact not all options were taken-up (often due to cost) by some of the partners there was nevertheless commitment from everyone in taking responsibility and implementing responses with apparent success.

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Nomination Letter

This submission is an example of a genuine partnership approach taken by the police, partners and businesses to tackle what might seem like a low level crime, but what was in fact costing tens of thousands of pounds and was having a major impact on the ability of those companies to trade successfully.

The owner of the problem worked with the POP co-ordinator utilising the SARA model to define the problem and identify some genuinely innovative solutions to dealing with the issues.

The results reveal that there was a 75% reduction in reported diesel theft, but more importantly the businesses on the industrial estate were galvanized into action, they realised that they had a responsibility in identifying a solution. They have improved security at their premises, formed a business watch scheme and now have greater confidence in the police and their partners.

I am confident that the improvements will prove sustainable and strongly support this submission.

Peter McPhillips
Chief Inspector
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