DC Matt Bowling
Greater Manchester Police
Introduction
• Illicit prescription medicine in Greater Manchester
• What the supply looks likes
• Successes in tackling the problem
• Operation Vulcan
Illicit Prescription Medication in Greater Manchester
Illicit Prescription Medication in Greater Manchester

• 2019 - Operation Cranium set up under the Challenger model.

• Partnership work cornerstone. Intelligence fed by user research led by Manchester Metropolitan University.

• The problem has only become bigger in the last 3-4 years.

• Ground Zero - Cheetham Hill, Manchester.

• Perfect storm for public health and law enforcement-
  • Increase in crime for distribution/sale/supply of illegal Class C drugs
  • Increase in associated crime linked to the supply of illicit drugs
  • Increase in polydrug deaths linked to the supply of drugs
  • Increase in risk of more unadulterated products hitting the market as we adapt to tackle the issue
Greater Manchester User Trends

- Illicit prescription drug market predominantly driven by demand for benzodiazepines and gabapentinoids.

- Most common illicit prescription drugs in Greater Manchester:
  - Diazepam & Alprazolam
  - Pregabalin
  - Tramadol
  - Zopiclone

- Poor quality heroin; smaller deals & less money for drugs is driving increased polysubstance use.

- Growth in popularity amongst under 25s linked to increased availability and affordable prices.
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Responses from Greater Manchester Users

“These are easy to buy over the counter in illegal shops and clients are moving more towards these drugs than street drugs”. (Group Facilitator, Recovery Project)

“The ones down at Cheetham Hill, you can get some white benzos and they only last six hours. You’ll take them, and basically, six hours later, you wake up, where the blue ones, and I could take say four of them, I could be asleep for ten hours. [. . .] People are still willing to take the chance even though they’re counterfeit.” (Male, Bolton, Homeless Polysubstance User)

. . . there’s two different ones, there’s white ones and blue ones. Interviewer: What’s the difference? The blue ones are hit and miss, they can just be chalk and do nothing, there’s nothing in some of them, at all. Nothing at all, you just get a blue mouth and then you know you’ve been ripped off but with the white ones, they’re just shit hot. (Male, Stockport, street homeless, Spice and prescription drug user)

“Pregabs with gear is popular, especially at night”. (Male, Supported Accommodation, Polysubstance User)
Polydrug Deaths

Polydrug Deaths where Benzodiazepines or Pregabalin involved

• 2020 deaths - approximately 8 within Greater Manchester
• 2021 deaths - approximately 13 within Greater Manchester - 31 regionally (highest on record and highest outside of Scotland*)
• 2022 deaths - approximately 10 within Greater Manchester

Nationally linked Death Data;

• Intelligence has linked Cheetham Hill sourced/supplied drugs to deaths outside of the North West to:

  Avon & Somerset
  Gloucestershire
  Devon & Cornwall
  Durham
  Derbyshire
  Essex
  Northern Ireland
  West Yorkshire
Local Headlines

- Coroner’s warning over highly-addictive ‘benzos’ as Cheetham Hill street drugs cocktail kills man
- How lockdown turned Bury New Road into the deadly black market drug capital of the North
- ‘Absolutely rife’: Drug linked to hundreds of deaths is being sold to Manchester’s homeless for just 50p a pill

FIGHT, PREVENT AND REDUCE CRIME
KEEP PEOPLE SAFE • CARE FOR VICTIMS
Sources of supply

- Theft/Burglaries from factories and pharmacies
- UK based fake pharmaceutical laboratories
- Via air and freight from laboratories overseas

Supply & Distribution from Greater Manchester
Packaging and Brands
Diazepam
Diazepam
Diazepam
Diazepam
Diazepam
Diazepam

REAL*
Pregabalin
Pregabalin
Tackling the Problem
Border Force

Breakdown of Border Force seizures between June 2020 and July 2021 destined for Greater Manchester by numbers:

- Tramadol: 180768
- Pregabalin: 60100
- Zopiclone: 300440
- Sildenafil: 30000
- Diazepam: 2000
- Others: 1080

(Figure showing bar chart with drug names and corresponding numbers)
Border Force
Operation Mayfly

17th May 2022

• Police warrants at 9 addresses
• Four arrested and charged with various offences
• £20,000 in cash seized
• Firearms seized including handguns.

• Two laboratories dismantled each with capacity to produce 200,000 tablets an hour.
• 2.6 million tablets seized as part of the investigation.
• Tablets sampled from the seizure show the active ingredient as etizolam, not diazepam.
Testing & Teamwork

- Focusing on the **vulnerabilities** of drug users a key part of our strategy - we know we can’t get rid of the problem through enforcement alone.

- Testing non-evidential samples to improve harm reduction has also strengthened our knowledge of what we’re up against.

- **Example October 2022 -**

  Following an overdose and hospitalisation of three service users in the waiting room of a treatment service in Manchester, tablets and capsules (brought that morning from the Cheetham Hill area) were confiscated by staff before they were taken away in ambulances - all survived. They were submitted through the MANDRAKE scheme for testing for public health purposes.
Testing & Teamwork

Drugs Seized by police/health professional → Police collect drugs

MANDRAKE tests → Data collected or Early Warning Issued

Intelligence shared
Test results
The Bensedin branded 10mg diazepam (Serbian brand) tablets contained no psychoactive substance.

The 20mg branded temazepam also had no psychoactive substance. Tests included looking for the presence of synthetic opioids.

MANDRAKE did multiple tests on the ‘Signature’ pregabalin (Indian brand) to see if this bore out the anecdotal reports that dosage varied considerably even in the same blister pack.

Capsules ranged from 198mg to 312mg. Mean 270mg. So some variations in dosage within a blister pack and also significantly higher than the 100mg or so range we found when tests on this brand were done last year.
OPERATION VULCAN
Cheetham Hill

Key points:

• Situated just north of the city centre and close to Salford.

• Long-standing reputation in Manchester and throughout the country as the capital for counterfeiting in the UK

• Up until October 2022 – approximately 130 premises believed to be involved in the sale of counterfeit good.
The Objective

In week run up to Christmas 2021 there were multiple reports of violent disorder on Bury New Road linked to disputes between drug dealers and spotters/shop owners.

Occurred again over weekend of 23-25th April 2022.
The Objective
Some of our Partners

- Monthly meetings with NHS chemists to collaborate on identifying new trends
- Better data collection on what we seize to help identify sources of product.
- Improved working co-operation with all agencies
OPERATION VULCAN

Working with partners and communities to rid Cheetham Hill and Strangeways of criminal activity

Overview of results

- 257 stop searches
- £248k cash seized
- 41 warrants executed
- 75 individual arrests
- 25 joint visits with over 226,000 suspected counterfeit vapes seized
- 72 counterfeit shops shut down
- 257 tonnes estimated street value of over 39 million pounds of counterfeit clothing, watches, perfumes and tobacco seized. Over 50% has already been sent to be ethically repurposed
- 35 Vehicles seized
- 1.2 million tablets of class C drugs recovered

#OPVULCAN

FIGHT, PREVENT AND REDUCE CRIME
KEEP PEOPLE SAFE • CARE FOR VICTIMS
Thank You