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The impact of COVID-19 on UK informant use and management

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ABSTRACT

The effect of COVID-19 on informant use and management, during the peak of the imposed Government lockdown measures was felt across English and Welsh police Dedicated Source Units. Within these restrictions, staff managing informants had to develop and then implement new strategies that delivered safe, yet effective, informant handling capacity and capability. Based on a survey of 205 respondents directly involved in the handling, control or authorisation of informants, this article examined their perceptions of the effect of COVID-19 in this highly specialised policing activity. The research findings revealed five broad themes associated with the impact of COVID-19 on informant management practices: (i) health protection; (ii) governance; (iii) innovation and technology; (iv) recruitment, communication and informant development and (v) tradecraft and intelligence. The article explored the organisational responses to initiating and maintaining informant-handler relationships and ensuring the flow of intelligence within this unique operational environment. Participants perceived that handler-informant relationships were strengthened, and also indications of a willingness to adapt policy and procedure associated with the informant management cycle: targeting, initial recruitment contact, assessment and evaluation, tasking and deployment and payment of informant rewards. It also highlighted a wider consensus that there was further scope for enhancing resilience to similar future pandemics including the use of enabling technology and responsive policy adaptation.

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Introduction

The pandemic prompted a ‘whole of government response’ (Commons Select Committee 2020) to prevent and control the transmission of COVID-19. Included amongst the raft of measures were, restrictions on people’s movements, their access to premises, and limitations on people’s social and professional association through the application of physical distancing rules (Coronavirus Act 2020, The Health Protection (Coronavirus) Regulations 2020). All of these measures, directly and indirectly, impacted on law enforcement’s capacity and capability to optimise intelligence from covert informants. The focus of this article is the perceived effects on Dedicated Source Units (DSU) to undertake the elicitation of intelligence from informants during the strictest period of national lock down restrictions, specifically, 23rd March 2020 to 13th May 2020 (Office for National Statistics 2020).

Covid-19 significantly changed the nature of the Informant-Handler relationship. Pre-pandemic, the primary focus of the relationship was the elicitation and clarification of intelligence, rather

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than an exploration of health welfare considerations. Recruitment of new informants was routine rather than by way of exception. Communication utilised both physical and mobile venues involving close proximity interactions, telephone and digital platform contacts rather than the Covid-19 driven remote interface methods.

Understanding the consequences of a failure to collect intelligence on a society is important. The collection of information is a core role of policing (Ericson and Haggerty 1997) and can improve the quality of decision-making at all levels of an organisation and is key to organisational understanding (James 2016). Intelligence-based decision-making reduces ambiguity (Betts 1978), it can influence organisation target selection, determine operational priorities and inform tactical choices to be applied against threats. Any reduction in the supply of informant intelligence may weaken law enforcements' operational response capability, thereby threatening community safety, and trust and confidence in policing.

The use and management of informants are not without its challenges. Informant deployment is undertaken within a complex and dynamic operational environment. Abuses, including entrapment by informants have previously undermined judicial and public confidence in the collection capability (Aaronson, 2013, Harfield and Harfield 2018, Norris, 2019).

Nonetheless, the informer plays a central role in threat identification and harm reduction across a range of offending types, such as tackling volume crime, burglary, youth crime and gangs (Balsdon 1996, Neyroud and Beckley 2001, IPCO 2019). Informants are pivotal to law enforcement efforts to tackle drug supply (Williams and Guess 1981, Dorn *et al.* 1992, Bean and Billingsley 2001), domestic extremism and terrorism (Hewitt 2010). In Northern Ireland, their use as a key source of information against loyalist and nationalist terrorism was, and still is, critical (Bamford 2005, Charters 2013). Mitigating threats is conditional on the availability of timely, accurate and sustained flows of intelligence. To that end, reporting by legally authorised and ethically managed informants affords a useful deployable tactic against known subjects of interest and threat groups (James 2013).

The impact of COVID-19 on recorded crime

Intelligence on existing and emerging crime is still required even though during the strictest period of COVID-19 restrictions police recorded crime fell by 32% (Office for National Statistics 2020). However, some particular crime types increased, specifically the recording of drug offences (Office for National Statistics 2020). It was also noted that organised crime had sought to take advantage of these unprecedented times (NCA 2020a). The reduced supply of drugs in a market with high demand has seen riskier criminal behaviour. For example, people breaking into official warehouses in attempts to allegedly recover previously seized drugs (NCA 2020b). Analysis of criminality revealed medical-related and hygiene products had also become a more attractive commodity for organised crime gangs, with increases in criminality reported targeting the manufacture and supply of unauthorised and counterfeit equipment and kit, adopting new methods of burglary artifice by posing as medical staff (Europol 2020).

As criminals adapt to new ways of working, so must law enforcement. If methods and routes for transfer of unauthorised and illicit commodities change, for example, a move from the use of airports to seaports, then the intelligence collection methods must reflect this new area of criminal activity and re-deploy informant capacity and capability accordingly. Law enforcement may need to pivot, refocus and adapt.

Responding to COVID-19: organisational adaptation

Organisational adaptation has been defined as 'intentional decision-making undertaken by organisational members, leading to observable actions that aim to reduce the distance between an organisation and its economic and institutional environments' (Sarta *et al.* 2021, p. 1). While this definition highlights the role potentially played by all of its organisation members, others posit adaptation is

‘the primary purpose of strategic management’ (Chakravarthy 1982, p. 35). In the context of informant management, this intuitively, would include both authorising officers and the National Police Chief’s Council leading strategic steering body for United Kingdom informer policy, the National Source Working Group (NSWG). The pandemic offers 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 payment and transfer of informant-related finance, and 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. Online reward payment 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 of payments and offer a degree of corruption-proofing in financial transactions. Online payments speed up the process of payments, and in doing so, enhance the handler and informant trust and confidence. However, cash payments offer an opportunity to personalise the interaction, to assess the informants’ welfare and to maintain rapport which a depersonalising and clinical financial transaction may not offer.

To maximise the success of an organisation’s adaptation to untoward events, policies, both local and national, should be flexible enough to respond to new operating requirements. Measures introduced could be limited, time-bounded and proportionate to the nature of the emergency, in this case, the pandemic. ‘Framing and defining how an organisation adapts is fundamental to understanding the phenomenon and to understanding how the phenomenon can be adjusted to favour or disfavour the organisation in question’ (Serena 2011, p. 1). In emergency contexts, sharing information, willingness to collaborate and shared values are important factors for network formation (Kapucu 2006). Resolving problems where traditional processes cannot, such as the provision of safe, secure and remote access informant-handler communication including digital image transfer, is more likely to be delivered through collaborative working with key stakeholders.

Applying organisational adaptation theory, law enforcement would be expected to respond to the challenges they faced by the pandemic. This will include, the Government’s restrictions on movements, the increased health risks, the imposition of accompanying control measures, and the shifting operational environment. They can achieve this expediting review, amendments and implementation of bespoke policy and procedures. According to organisational adaptation theory, organisations that quickly adapt are more successful in the long term. Organisation adaptation is not straight-forward and its capacity to adapt may be ‘impeded by bureaucratic faults that plague large, hierarchical organisations’ (Serena 2011, p. 10) and ‘adaptation is at times equated with change, congruence, strong performance, or survival’ (Sarta *et al.* 2021, p. 16). The extent of adaptation can vary and depends on the willingness to take risks at an executive level (Rosenbloom 2000). Delivering against wicked problems, for example delivering a secure digital image transfer between the informer and handlers will depend on an organisation’s ability to ‘integrate managers’ attention across hierarchies’ (Sarta *et al.* 2021, p. 12) and ‘whether adaptation is pursued relates to the strategic intent of organizations and their ability to change’ (Sarta *et al.* 2021, p. 13). According to this position, adaptation is only possible by securing attention from not only senior stakeholders, i.e. the NSWG but also other organisational leads, i.e. organisational Directors of Technology.

Communicating the operational requirements and the benefits of working differently increases the likelihood of organisational adaptation as it recognises the potential competitive advantage (Powell 1992). Adaptation depends on competition and in a traditional business sense this means competition from other companies. As a consequence, adaptation is, in part, dependent on the activity and behaviours of other companies so it should not be viewed as independent (Pfeffer and Salancik 1978). In a policing context, the disruptive competition to police efforts to reduce

crime originate from criminal offenders who seek to maximise profit, while simultaneously, keeping 'one step ahead of the law'.

COVID 19: the impact on recruitment and elicitation

Broadly speaking, the recruitment of informants, their subsequent deployment against subjects of interest and the elicitation of relevant intelligence is the *raison d'être* of handlers and informant managers. Recruitment of informants is built on personal engagement and interaction with others (Cherkashin and Feifer 2005). There is need to develop a nuanced understanding of the willingness of informants to engage in various forms of interaction with their handlers and, critical to this, is the importance of establishing rapport. Rapport is critical to the elicitation of intelligence (Nunan *et al.* 2020a). Rapport outperforms accusatorial approaches (Evans *et al.* 2013) as it increases the information gained (Nunan *et al.* 2020b), enhances cooperation and increases trust (Alison and Alison 2017). Remote communication, however, does not mean intelligence cannot be elicited (Nunan *et al.* 2020c), but environmental factors may benefit elicitation, with the size of a room influencing a person's tendency to open up (Okken *et al.* 2013).

Despite the importance of rapport, no research has addressed the topic of rapport between handlers and informants interacting remotely to one another. The same can be said of the concept of adaptation of policy and procedures in a Dedicated Source Unit context. As a consequence of these research gaps, the present study aimed to develop our understanding of issues associated with the use and management of informants' communication. Hence, this research explored the perceptions and experiences of a neglected sample of police officers and police staff (i.e. source handlers, controllers and authorising officers) concerning the gathering of intelligence from informants during a pandemic, and their proposals for future working arrangements.

Methodology

Participants

The present sample ($N = 205$) comprised police officers and police staff operating in English and Welsh Dedicated Source Units (DSUs). Participants included the three primary roles in the use and management of informants, namely, handlers ($n = 139$; 67.8%), controllers ($n = 58$; 28.3%) and authorising officers ($n = 8$; 3.9%).

Study design and materials

A survey methodology was undertaken to explore the participants' perceptions and experiences of the impact of COVID-19 on the use and management of informants during the official UK government lockdown period. The survey was circulated in the form of an electronic questionnaire via Jisc Online Surveys, which aimed to gather both quantitative and qualitative data from the participants. The questions utilised were generated following a consultative process with strategic leads.

Procedure and ethical considerations

The National Police Chiefs' Council (NPCC) Intelligence Practice Research Consortium assisted with access to individual gatekeepers who were established for each law enforcement agency. A purposive sampling method was undertaken as participants were required to be working within a Dedicated Source Unit. Once the ethical considerations met the first author's university minimal risk criteria, a memorandum of understanding was drawn up and agreed with participating law enforcement agencies, to ensure that the final written report did not disclose any sensitive information. Additionally, the protection of participants' identities was of utmost importance due to the covert

nature of their work. Therefore, the questionnaire was introduced by a participant information section, outlining that completion of the survey was taken as informed consent.

There were limitations to the research methodology. Questions had to be designed to avoid disclosure of sensitive methods being utilised by handlers. For example, rather than probing the actual telephone application or online security software programme used to communicate, the survey limited itself to a simple response around 'telephone' or 'online'. Also, to maintain organisational anonymity the survey did not distinguish between different policing organisations. Continuing this commitment to anonymity, no demographic information was collected from the handlers or their informants. This enabled surveys to be sent electronically over a public network.

Data analysis

The thematic analysis principles outlined by Braun and Clarke (2012) were utilised to analyse the responses from the open-ended questions. Therefore, this research progressed in three stages. First, the overall research question was developed: how has the official government COVID-19 lockdown period affected the management and use of covert human intelligence sources? Second, in order to answer the overarching research question, the questionnaire consisted of qualitative and quantitative questions as outlined in the Appendix. Third, a combined inductive and deductive approach to data analysis was performed.

Six phases of thematic analysis were undertaken. Phase 1 comprised the authors familiarising themselves with the data, by reading and rereading the participants' responses. The authors made notes of pertinent discussions and phrases while reading through data, providing a glimpse into the possible themes yet to be generated (Braun and Clarke 2012).

Phase 2 began with the systematic analysis of the participants' responses, by coding phrases and discussion points that clearly stood out. This process was more inductive in nature, as the initial codes given to such pertinent points were strongly related to the language and concepts used by the participants. The initial codes acted as shorthand pithy summaries of the participants' discussions. Initial codes were applied to each response, with some responses given more than one initial code if such responses had clear differentiating points within. A new initial code was only generated if previously used initial codes did not fit the response at hand (Braun and Clarke 2012). Parallel to this process, the initial codes were alphabetically tabulated in a separate document and reviewed to manage the repetition of similar initial codes.

Phase 3 comprised the searching of themes. This was undertaken by merging similar first-order codes to create fewer second-order codes, and finally creating themes. Theme creation is an active process, implying that themes are not discovered but rather generated (Taylor and Ussher 2001). The themes generated were derived from the data (i.e. inductive) as well as shaped by the authors' prior knowledge (i.e. deductive).

Phase 4 consisted of a review of the possible themes. The themes were tested against the data extracts as well as the data set as a whole (Braun and Clarke 2012). The coded responses that were defined by the initial codes were then put underneath each theme. Following this, the relationship between the newly generated themes was discussed, to ensure they flow in telling the overall story of the dataset. Effective themes should work together yet still be distinctive in their own right (Braun and Clarke 2012).

Phase 5 concerned the defining and naming of the themes; themes should relate but not overlap (Braun and Clarke 2012). An essentialist approach was undertaken when interpreting the data, permitting the researchers to explore the meanings and experiences in a straight-forward manner. Thus, the researchers utilised a semantic approach within the thematic analysis, as themes were generated from the surface meaning of the responses, starting with description through to interpreting the data with broader implication to the existing literature (Patton 1990).

Phase 6, the final process, comprised the write-up of the report. The authors strived to tell a coherent story through the themes, which each theme built upon its predecessor. The present research

produced a 'Results and Discussion' section to avoid repetition across the reporting of the results and subsequent discussions. Merged results and discussion section are argued to be beneficial when the data holds a strong connection to the literature (Braun and Clarke 2012). This research aimed to explore the impact of COVID-19 on the use and management of UK informants, from a large sample of police officers who work within Dedicated Source Units.

Results and discussion

The following section displays the qualitative themes and discusses these with regards to the informant literature and the impact of COVID-19 on policing practices. The thematic analysis resulted in five themes: (i) health protection; (ii) governance; (iii) innovation and technology; (iv) recruitment, communication and informant development and (v) tradecraft and intelligence. For each theme, exemplar quotations that best represent the participants' responses are presented and discussed in turn.

Health protection

The emergence of the COVID-19 pandemic brought with it health risks directly impacting on informant management, not only in terms of risks to handlers and informants but also their respective families and associates. Central to any DSU and wider organisational response was the need to ensure sufficient protection from transmission for both police and informants either through the use of Personal Protection Equipment (PPE) or adopting strategies that ensured, to varying degrees, compliance with social distancing advice and regulations (The Health Protection (Coronavirus) Regulations 2020). Participants from the present study highlighted their shift from contacts and payments supporting intelligence taskings, to one that focused on the health needs of the informants.

The impact of COVID-19 had real-world consequences for DSU's, as 37.1% of the participants reported that COVID-19 caused sickness absences during the period of lockdown. Although, in terms of its impact on the amount of intelligence collected, only 23.7% of participants stated there had been a decrease in intelligence as a consequence of COVID-19 related sickness absences. The experience of COVID-19 in the workplace ensured that health prevention was prioritised:

Consideration is now given regarding additional payments or assistance with purchasing medical supplies or equipment that the source [informant] needs. (Participant 8)

The wider health concerns of informants also attracted attention from DSU staff, including where COVID-19 related issues were perceived to be impacting on the welfare of informants including mental health risks caused by a loss of income from traditional (Self-employed/employed status) and non-traditional work (informant deployments). 62% of participants commented on the differences in approach taken to ensure and maintain the welfare of informants:

Many CHIS [informants], given their status, have felt particularly vulnerable during lockdown and have needed increased emotional support and advice, for example in terms of benefits, food banks etc. (Participant 5)

Handlers mentioned that:

Welfare issues increased with relationships within CHIS [informants] home and some having to move out. This required more contact with the CHIS [informants] to ensure that CHIS welfare needs were being taken care of and the fact that CHIS [informants] work has stopped, means therefore their income was affected causing additional stress. (Participant 119)

The impact of Government imposed lockdown and restrictions on movement has also contributed to some additional informant stress, as a consequence changing domestic circumstances:

Real attention is being paid to the individual circumstances - vulnerabilities of them [informants] and also their families that would not normally have been relevant. There is a need to understand the real fear of some CHIS [informants] during the pandemic on top of their ordinary stresses. (Participant 97)

Participants regularly commented on their statutory responsibilities for assessing and checking on an informant's welfare and their compliance around Government lockdown measures. After reviewing the new operating environment, bespoke COVID-19 related risk assessments would have been prepared by handlers. These would have been informed through informant-handler engagement, open source research and reviews of internal databases and policy documents. However, the opportunity for a physical meeting between the handler and the informant would have further enhanced any risk assessment.

As a consequence of their professional relationship, handlers had a unique opportunity to reinforce official public health information to informants, provide accurate and up-to-date advice, particularly to those perceived as most vulnerable therefore reducing the likelihood of transmission. This advice also included cautioning informants not to attempt to secure intelligence in contravention of COVID-19 regulations (The Health Protection (Coronavirus) Regulations 2020).

Welfare is very focused on physical health, and the economic impact of being furloughed/out of work. Contacts are primarily welfare related, and intelligence is a by-product. (Participant 36)

As a consequence of physical meeting and movement restrictions, such conversations between handlers and informants took place over the telephone:

There has been an increased time spent on the telephone with longer conversations focused on welfare [of the informant]. There has been no actual impact on the personal health/welfare of CHIS [informant], but there is a shared apprehension and mutual concerns for the wider public etc. (Participant 18)

Effective communication between informants and their handlers is critical to the success of any authorised relationship (Alison and Alison 2017). Contact provides an occasion for welfare to be checked, heard and addressed, and provides an opportunity for intelligence to be collected, clarified or corroborated while also reminding them of the parameters of their use and conduct. Such interactions also provide a window for informants to be briefed and tasked to secure further intelligence on behalf of the organisation.

Table 1 displays the impact of COVID-19 on communication methods. Not surprisingly, COVID-19 significantly reduced the number of physical meetings between informants and handlers with 96.6% of participants reporting that physical meets have decreased. Physical meetings were reduced due to a combination of reasons, including efforts to reduce virus transmission, the absence of open venues for meetings, restrictions on movements during the peak of the lockdown, and the need, in some cases to secure *participating* informant authority for some meetings. Participants reported the largest increase for communication via telephone contact, with 60% of participants reporting an increase in its use, as this method avoided breaches of movement restrictions and risks of transmission.

There was a marginal increase (3.9%) in the use of online technology to communicate between informant and handler. Participants reported that the COVID-19 restrictions did not appear to act as an accelerator for the adoption of new technologies, as witnessed in the wider society (i.e. the surge in the use of tele-conferencing apps including Microsoft Teams or Zoom). However, participants may

Table 1. The impact of the official Government lockdown period on the method used to contact informants ($N = 205$).

Perceived change	Method of contact frequency (%)			
	Physical meeting	Telephone contact	Online contact	Mail contact
Decreased	198 (96.6)	18 (8.8)	4 (2.0)	1 (0.5)
Remained the same	1 (0.5)	63 (30.7)	24 (11.7)	20 (9.8)
Increased	0 (0.0)	123 (60.0)	8 (3.9)	7 (3.4)
Not applicable	6 (2.9)	1 (0.5)	169 (82.4)	177 (86.3)

not have been sighted on all the strategic level developments that were taking place in these areas, something which may improve with enhanced communication. As noted later in this article, the reasons for a lack of take-up centred around training, availability of secure communication devices, concern over the security of online devices, and the default to the relatively easier, form of communication, the telephone. The small increase in the use of online communication to support contact may also have more to do with the absence of, and access to, approved secure electronic devices rather than an unwillingness to utilise this means of communication. The use of mail as a means of communication also increased marginally with a reported 3.4% using the method.

Some participants reported some unforeseen benefits falling out of the need to maintain social distancing:

Handlers working from home – reduced the risk of compromise to a handler having to attend a police station therefore also reducing risk of compromise to source [informant]. (Participant 3)

Additionally, contact via the telephone also provided additional benefits:

There has been more contact with CHIS [informant] over the phone allowing for more timely updates/tasking, rather than waiting for a physical meeting. There is also less time pressure on CHIS [informant] to attend physical meetings, they can better account for /have a cover story in place for a phone call rather than having to attend a physical meeting. (Participant 64)

The lockdown restrictions also provided informants a natural way to reconnect with people they have not spoken to in a while. This provided opportunities for connections to established and intelligence opportunities created:

The lockdown presented an opportunity for people to get back 'in touch' with people they may not have contacted for some time (phone/social media, etc.). It was natural for people to ask how others were getting on and make arrangements post lock down. I felt this was a chance for the CHIS [informant] to maybe push contact more than they might have done prior to lockdown. I felt we were a bit too hasty to put the operational activity on 'pause' as opposed to maintain the work. However, the situation at the start of lockdown was unknown so it was very difficult to assess. However, I do think we could bear that in mind if it happens again. (Participant 24)

Finally, there was some degree of frustration that while most, but by no means all, DSUs adhered to a local policy decision not to recruit new informants or arrange physical meetings between informants and handler, other sections of society, and even areas of law enforcement swiftly adapted to operating within the context of COVID-19 even if this meant close proximity contacts:

If [health] screening, PPE [Personal Public Protection], vehicle decontamination and other measures are ok for supermarkets, taxi drivers, police interviews, ambulance/paramedics, factory/shop reopening – why not for resuming regular informant meets? (Participant 169)

Governance

Policy guidance owned by the NPCC National Source Working Group offers national common standards to increase interoperability across policing networks and also direction to staff operating in the field to successfully and ethically manage an informant. Good policy should be easily accessible to practitioners, regularly reviewed and updated, aligned with evidence-based practice rather than anecdote, and, developed by and responsive to, the needs of its customers. Two final important indicators of good policy are that firstly, it needs, wherever possible, to be enabling rather than prescriptive, and secondly, that it should stimulate and foster innovation. This may entail organisations to revisit assumptions of traditional practices and take informed risks in policy development. For example, some participants questioned administrative requirements, not mandated in law, but required to be completed during the use and management of informants:

Source [informants] Terms and Conditions (T&C's) are unnecessary and not worth the paper they are written on. Police forces and AO's [Authorising Officers] place too much focus on this and I'm aware of cases in both crime

and CT [counter-terrorism] work where handlers were instructed to complete T&C's over the phone, and at least two of these instances were with brand new recruits. This creates more problems than it solves. (Participant 29)

While the issuing of signed terms and conditions may be considered consistent with complying with case law (*R v Sutherland* 2002), further research needs to be undertaken to assess how existing policy withstood the challenges of COVID-19 in terms of informant use. However, the returns from participants suggest that there was some divergence in policy or traditional practice to enable particular informant-handler relationships to continue. This may be down to different interpretations of the available guidance and diverse approaches to risk. Some participants' responses may reflect a need for a new strategy priority rather than a policy change, such as the use of technology to support communication and administration or the practices underpinning financial payments.

Many participants highlighted financial payments to informants as one area that may benefit from further policy review, with existing interpretations of underpinning rules requiring a sensitive, pragmatic and flexible approach, albeit operating within a period of lockdown. Financial payments in this context included salary payments, retainers, expenses to support tasking and rewards for specific intelligence. In 'normal' circumstances, informants, tasked on longer term deployments against serious organised crime and terrorism, may attract a salary or retainer payment. The criteria for these payments are bespoke to the use of the informant, but in general terms they are used to ensure a steady flow of intelligence from the informant, to incentivise informant activity, to encourage greater commitment from the informant in satisfying intelligence taskings. In addition, reasonable costs incurred by an informant in the course of their deployments would be reimbursed. The impact of COVID-19 on the method used to pay informants is displayed below in [Table 2](#).

The participant's responses were varied with some reporting an unwillingness by controllers or authorising officers to show flexibility in whether payments should be made and as a consequence, risking current and future informant-handler relationships. Participant 134 eloquently voiced the concerns of many participants:

Salary/retainer payments have been viewed by some Authorising Officers/Line Management as not valid during the pandemic, as the source [informant] is/has not been able to be fully tasked, or able to attend, or conduct training. This was not communicated at the start of the pandemic to either handlers/source [informant]; and if the case is that we are not going to make any usual payments then perhaps this should be communicated early to the handlers/source to control expectations. Consideration should perhaps be given as to whether the source [informant] should be cancelled temporarily if they are not to be tasked or paid their usual salary/retainer due to these types of circumstances. Persons subject to the government furlough scheme receive a proportion of their wage for not working, so it is unrealistic to expect a source to not expect to receive payment. The lockdown is not their doing; and any short-term financial gain made by withholding payment should be measured against the long-term damage to the source [informant]-handler relationship. In some cases, this may be irretrievable. It is possible for the handler to use continued payments to foster improved relationships with the source [informant], which could lead to them feeling an obligation to assist more readily in the future. (Participant 134)

Some called for a change in existing policy to support ongoing payments during the pandemic in order to maintain the handler-informant relationship:

The lockdown/pandemic circumstances have provided a natural commonality for discussion & feeling of being in it together. If retainer/salary payments were/are made then this could provide a positive reinforcement of the relationship and future buy in from the source. (Participant 134)

Table 2. Change in the method used for paying informants financial rewards during the official lockdown period ($N = 205$).

Perceived change	Method of financial payment (%)			
	Direct payment in cash	Online payment	Payment through a third party	Payment in kind
Decreased	73 (35.6)	1 (0.5)	3 (1.5)	2 (1.0)
Remained the same	109 (53.2)	10 (4.9)	15 (7.3)	19 (9.3)
Increased	9 (4.4)	1 (0.5)	2 (1.0)	1 (0.5)
Not applicable	14 (6.8)	193 (94.1)	185 (90.2)	183 (89.3)

Note: Payment in kind may include, though not limited to, rent, deposits, and mortgages.

Participants also reported difficulties in accessing money to make financial reports, either as a result of banks being closed or police organisations no longer keeping sufficient floats of cash on their premises:

Discussed the issue with CHIS [informant] and reassured them that prompt payment would be made when cash flow allowed. (Participant 86)

Restricted access to cash meant that payments were often prioritised across informants:

Delayed submitting reward applications [to informants] where there was no urgency. Used further tradecraft measures to pass on the urgent finance. (Participant 42)

However, other participants highlighted a more flexible and pragmatic interpretation taken on financial payments within their DSU. 57.1% of participants reported no deferring of any financial payment until after lockdown restrictions eased. The primary focus of payments appeared to be to support informants welfare during the period of lockdown:

Financial aid [was paid] to informants due to no money being available from workplaces due to being ineligible for the Furlough scheme. (Participant 45)

By showing support, the informant-handler relationship may be maintained (Alison and Alison 2017). Rapport maintenance is vital to the collection of intelligence (Nunan *et al.* 2020b):

Handlers agreed that the source [informant] should still be paid their salary minus expenses as a show of faith and as a tool to motivate them when the pandemic is over. (Participant 124)

Where financial payments were permitted, participants displayed a range of alternative payment methods with many utilising Dead Letter Boxes / Dead Drop to complete the exchange. Others developed other tradecraft measures which reflected Government restrictions on movement and association enabling contact to be made:

Incorporating DLB [Dead Letter Boxes] into essential Source [informant] shopping trips and exercise sessions. (Participant 3)

DSU's that continued to make financial payments often identified innovative ways to transfer the money. Detailed disclosure of all these methods is not appropriate for this article but it included the use of proxies, commercial paying-in processes and contemporary financial transactions.

DSU's anticipating challenges associated with making financial payments adopted a variety of measures that reduced the number of physical contacts required for payments to be made but still ensured payment during the lockdown period:

We provided larger up-front payments when we anticipated lockdown and we otherwise conduct drops. Electronic not suitable in majority of cases. (Participant 9)

Conversely, payments were made retrospectively:

Triple payment made during 3rd month via [redacted for security reasons] tradecraft methods. (Participant 42)

However:

Payments would be much easier if we could have access to deposit funds directly into the bank accounts of our sources or an admin free system of using pre-paid credit cards without having to fill out endless forms. The electronic footprint is always the issue that we encounter with this sort of payment method. (Participant 8)

While business continuity planning has been a standard function across access law enforcement, participants noted that their application to informant management during pandemics are generally undeveloped:

A pandemic should now form part of our business continuity plan both at strategic and tactical level. We were unprepared for this fast-moving scenario; however, we improvised and quickly adapted our working practices to

provide a level of service, mainly with the focus on the welfare of the informant and not fulfilling an intelligence requirement. (Participant 16)

However:

Depending on the pandemic [business continuity plans] will dictate the response. Early planning before it [the pandemic] hits is useful to negate some of the impacts although many of the decisions will have to be made in a fluid situation and may differ from unit to unit depending on their situation/locations. (Participant 118)

The ability of a DSU to maintain essential functions during a pandemic is critical to the maintenance of an organisation's intelligence capability. Closely linked to this is the ability of the DSU to recover from a disruption to its work, such as a reduction in the recruitment of new informants or a drop-in intelligence coverage. In preparing a business continuity plan a DSU will need to firstly, assess and decide which functions are essential and secondly, review existing policies and technology to ascertain whether they are flexible and robust enough to support a surge of alternative working practices (i.e. working from home or increase use of particular tradecraft measures).

Innovation and technology

Some of the potential challenges to effective informant use were partly addressed as a result of implementation of innovative tradecraft, policy re-interpretation and pragmatic leadership decisions. Legislative and health restrictions necessitated informant handling activity to either stop or to be undertaken differently.

New ways of working necessitated greater use of enabling technologies although the availability or access to equipment varied across the country. Unforeseen benefits, arising out of the organisational response operating within COVID-19 related restrictions, were noted by some participants. These included reduced risks of compromise due to few physical contact meetings, efficiencies accrued through a shift from physical meetings to telephone contacts, and the potential for the pandemic to act as accelerator to the introduction of new enabling technologies. One area highlighted by participants was the need for technical support to enable new and more agile means of working, mostly centring around the provision of secure, remote access to sensitive systems or tele-conferencing, while adhering to the Government lockdown restrictions:

Use of a secure app [application] to speak to CHIS [informants] which would allow a visual check for welfare purposes. i.e. similar to FaceTime / Zoom etc but one with higher security. (Participant 29)

In order to have:

Greater cohesion in developing technology (apps) which can be used for the safe transfer of intelligence from source to handler. (Participant 8)

There was acknowledgement that the lockdown period, with its associated restrictions on movement and access required further consideration of new ways of working including home working and secure remote access to data systems. Participants stated that in addition to the equipment required to work from home:

More trust to be placed on handlers to work independently of supervision. (Participant 18)

In order to:

Allow for secret CHIS [informant] management systems on laptops. Allow a staff car to drive around [carry] with alias documents so working at home is easier. (Participant 32)

The unanticipated benefits in terms of innovation is not limited to the handler or the organisation. As well as strengthened informant-handler relationships, the data quality of collected intelligence and sharing of this intelligence has also been reported to have improved:

The informant has learned to be more accurate and clarify spellings, online links better, which before would have been shown to the handler. The informants have become more focused on detail and are now passing information more succinctly, due to time constraints. Also, the relationship with both handlers has strengthened due to welfare bonding and the lockdown situation affecting everyone's personal lives. (Participant 42)

Additionally:

I [handler] have had to conduct all of my contacts via telephone and this has made me alter my style of questioning to elicit the detail required. Usually I would utilise technology at physical meets to gain this detail. This new form of interaction has shown my sources [informants] what I require, and I am finding that they are coming back to me with more information that is of interest. (Participant 8)

Participants have also noted that the informant's access to potential persons of interest has widened to operating online:

Online identifiers (of those not previously considered to be operating online) have been scrutinised more, leading to some instances where new tasking/relationships have been identified where potentially, in normal operational circumstances they would not have been. Prior to COVID restrictions, the informant was considered only in terms of 'real -world' access to people of interest rather than their 'online access'. (Participant 55)

Participants did however highlight difficulties in accessing or using technologies that permitted communication between the informant and handlers centred on the transfer and viewing of digital images for identification or corroborative purposes. 7.8% of participants reported challenges in transferring images and 78% stated they did not transfer images digitally. This matter appeared to be an issue even before lockdown, but the problem was compounded by the significant reduction in physical meetings with the informant:

The ability to deliver photo tasking securely to a CHIS [informants]. At present this is done during physical meetings, a secure platform is needed to be able to achieve this during any future lockdowns and for quick time tasking in general. (Participant 64)

Participants called for policy changes around these areas:

Need for a recognised and nationally agreed system(s) for image transfer between source and handling teams. (Participant 29)

Furthermore, participants discussed that:

With [operational] partners, we explored new ways of being able to facilitate this [the sharing and showing of images between informants and handlers]. (Participant 5)

Although, participants acknowledged this is not an easy task:

The ability to easily provide digital imagery, most individuals are redirected towards the online arena, but the gaining of positive ID on targets without the facility to show digital images is difficult. (Participant 12)

Interestingly, while some participants reported the inability to resolve the issue of receiving, showing or displaying digital images between themselves and their informants, 14.1% of participants reported having no problem with this task, identifying and deploying alternative methods instead. This is an area worth further research in an attempt to understand the obstacles to sharing best practice across the informant management community.

Recruitment, communication and informant development

Due to turnover of informants and new reporting requirements, all DSU's require a continued refreshment of its informant stable. In practice, this takes place with regular reviews of the informant including their performance, the relevance and proportionality of their use and conduct authorities and, their continuing access to subjects of interest that support investigative priorities. This ensures a DSU's reporting capability remains aligned to investigative priorities and organisational intelligence requirements. This necessitates effective recruitment strategies that identify both targets for

recruitment and the deployment of recruitment activity itself. However, lockdown restrictions resulted in some DSU's ceasing recruitment activity as venues closed, transport journeys were reduced and potential informant's movements were curtailed.

Table 3 displayed that the majority of participants (88.3%) perceived that the level of recruitment during lockdown had decreased. Recruitment was further hampered through the suspension of many law enforcement-community engagement initiatives, reduced beat patrolling and, as a consequence of COVID-19, a refocused policing requirement. The reduction in police-community interactions that traditionally generated informant referrals for a DSU.

Again, there were different organisational approaches adopted by authorising officers. Some directed a complete cessation of recruitment:

Recruitment activity largely ceased in the period immediately following lockdown due to the inability to physically meet individuals and the undesirability of recruiting a CHIS [informant] without face-to-face contact. The customer requirement also significantly reduced, and therefore reduced the justification for recruitment activity. (Participant 5)

There was also:

A regional decision to temporarily suspend recruitment. As such police led recruitment is on hold. (Participant 44)

Just over half the participants (52.7%) reported the use of different recruitment methods during lockdown when compared to pre-lockdown period. The restrictions led to staff exploring alternative ways of working, either by introducing new techniques or revisiting previously underused techniques. One participant responded to the issues faced by a DSU during lockdown by stating that:

Recruitments on a face to face basis was not possible so other means like social media and telephone calls were increased. (Participant 159)

Not all authorising officers adopted 'a no recruitment' approach. Some offered more flexibility in recruitment authorities, permitting activity where there was an evidenced operational necessity and it could be undertaken safely with the necessary appropriate measures including the selection of alternative venues for meetings or the use of alternative communication platforms:

Recruitment difference during lockdown was the use of a Police Station and appropriately sanitising [the venue] it before and after. (Participant 126)

Others given the authority to recruit noted the additional burden on operational planning:

The differences in post lockdown recruitment included the time taken to recruit due to lock down rules, reduced venues, reduced natural cover, need to achieve social distancing, security and welfare considerations of the CHIS [informant] and the handling team. (Participant 20)

Other participants, while authorised to recruit perceived the conditions imposed for a recruitment would make any approach less effective in assessing a prospective informant's suitability. There was a reluctance, by some, to wholeheartedly adopt the recruitment opportunities:

As a unit we have not progressed recruitment. Personally, I find cold call approaches counter-productive and would not wish to scupper many months of hard surveillance work, etc. with a phone call type recruitment approach. (Participant 75)

Table 3. The perceived impact of the official Government lockdown period on the regulatory of contacting informants and level of recruitment (N = 205).

Perceived change	Regular contact (%)	Level of recruitment (%)
Decreased	64 (31.2)	181 (88.3)
Remained the same	100 (48.8)	20 (9.8)
Increased	41 (20.0)	4 (2.0)

This notion is expanded upon:

Telephone recruitment, I believe, would be very much as a last resort/urgent disruption. Physical recruitment allows for you to control the approach, see how the target reacts to certain verbal interchange, read their body language – all invaluable and it also allows you to decide whether a further approach is worthwhile. (Participant 89)

Conversely, not all DSU's witnessed a reduction in informant numbers during the lockdown:

Whilst we have been in lockdown, our [informant] stable has grown in number and we have not lost any [informant RIPA] authorities. One member of staff is shielded but visits the office to upload contacts and complete work when the office is empty. Whilst there has been a general downturn in activity, I anticipate as we are now meeting [informants] physically again we will be back in a strong position in the near future. (Participant 143)

Different policy interpretations at a local level cannot account for all the reduction in recruitment. Active recruitment during this lockdown period may have been further hindered by the absence of analytical capability, handlers unable to undertake research on potential new recruits due to office database access restrictions and restrictions around traditional recruitment pipelines including custody office suites and investigator engagement with offenders and witnesses all reducing the generation of source referrals. Furthermore, tradecraft challenges, rather than policy blocks, may have led to some recruiters to make a decision themselves not to recruit.

Recruitment is simply not a single activity. In practice it incorporates a number of different stages, including the encouragement and management of informant referrals, researching and profiling potential informants' access to subjects of interest, the risks of their use, and the preparation of operational risk assessments to support the planning of the informant-handler approach. In essence, the restrictions imposed as a consequence of COVID-19, need not have cessated the recruitment process in its entirety.

Tradecraft and intelligence

Tradecraft describes the steps taken by operatives to both manage and protect their sources, methods and intelligence. It requires the application and compliance of organisational practices in a diverse range of operating environments. The emergence of COVID-19 led to restrictions in terms of handler/informant movements, venue selection and use and health management considerations. Accordingly, tradecraft had to be adapted to enable operational activity, when and wherever possible, to continue.

Some tradecraft was adapted to reflect COVID-19 health concerns and therefore minimising risks of transmission between handlers and informants. Activity that may have been previously part of a formal sit-down meeting, for example, for the purpose of the handover of monies, was replaced through the use of a tradecraft skill for example a brush contact / pass. This adaptation also extended to the activity of recruitment:

More use of cold call telephone calls. 1 x physical pitch but with COVID-19 questionnaire and PHA [Public Health Agency] protection i.e. face masks and hand sanitizer. (Participant 148)

While intelligence requirements remained relatively unchanged as lockdown was introduced, the societal response to the pandemic generated new intelligence collection requirements, unique to the COVID-19 operating environment (Breaches of lockdown rules, threats to public health and criminal behaviour associated with 'new' crime i.e. damage to 5G masts).

Overall, participants reported the quantity of intelligence was markedly lower during lockdown than prior to it (see [Table 4](#)). 76.6% reporting a decrease and only 4.9% reporting an increase. The reasons for the decrease varied:

Decreased reporting on all crime types due to reduction in levels of crime and also due to little or no contact between CHIS [informants] and their associates. (Participant 80)

Table 4. The impact of the official Government lockdown period on the quantity and quality of intelligence collected from informants ($N = 205$).

Perceived change	Quantity of intelligence (%)	Quality of intelligence (%)
Decreased	157 (76.6)	85 (41.5)
Remained the same	38 (18.5)	114 (55.6)
Increased	10 (4.9)	6 (2.9)

As a consequence of little to no physical meetings, informants reportedly felt reluctant to discuss certain topics over the telephone:

Information around the mind-set of particular individuals [was not provided]. Face-to-face contact is better in this aspect as people don't want to discuss sensitive matters on the phone/social media. (Participant 24)

Moreover, a lack of access to physical environments such as prison meant that reporting reduced:

HMP [Her Majesty's Prison] prisoners have been subject to enhanced lockdown and this has led to a sharp decrease in the amount of reporting from those establishments. (Participant 8)

While the majority of participants reported a reduction in intelligence, some reported an increase. The changes in communication methodology and increases in the frequency of contact has unexpectedly led some participants to report that more intelligence collection had been collected:

The number of phone calls made between the informant and handler are more often than physical meets now. Maybe 1 phone call per week compared to the usual 1 physical meet a month. This has resulted in more intelligence gained as the CHIS [informant] does not forget as much. (Participant 127)

Limitations and future directions

This research gained privileged access to an under researched sample of police officers and staff who work within police DSUs. It is acknowledged that self-reported data may be susceptible to inaccurate memories of past events and socially desirable answers (Robson and McCartan 2016). However, the present data accessed a large sample, providing a representative insight into the participants' perceptions and experiences of the impact of COVID-19 on the management and use of police informants. As a consequence of collecting a policing sample, the results may not transfer to other non-law enforcement authorities, such as trading standards, armed services and intelligence agencies.

The varied responses to operating within the Governmental lockdown suggest there are different risk appetites held by authorising officers both within and across different police organisations. The differences in risk thresholds across authorising officers may be an interesting area of further research to explore what factors are at play. Additionally, the informant–handler relationship is dyadic in nature, and the present research has only addressed the perceptions of one side (i.e. the police officer). Future research may wish to fill this research gap by exploring the informants' perceptions and experiences of undertaking the informant role during a pandemic.

Conclusion

Health emergencies require timely, decisive and evidence-based decision-making. In essence, critical events require critical governance. In the context of informant use, COVID-19 acted as an inflection point and provided an opportunity for a strategic leadership approach that emboldened relentless innovation through delegated authority and empowerment. This was an operational necessity if DSU's were to maintain its informant management capacity and capability. The research reveals that many practitioners enhanced and adapted traditional practices during different and changing circumstances although there were regional differences in the interpretation of what and how activities could continue. While constraints ensured that some adopted and adapted processes were

imperfect, they offered additional functionality and operational flexibility. The research also showed that many staff, at all levels, showed a leadership that introduced a quality connected to an understanding of what needed to be done with the capability to achieve it, albeit, within the prevailing legal, resource and health constraints.

Responding to Covid-19 demanded organisational adaptation on a scale not witnessed since the enactment of the Regulation of Investigatory Powers Act 2000. Uncertainty and complex operational environments may lead to ambiguity around finding suitable solutions (Dunn 2020). Consequently, strategic leaders are challenged to quickly respond, reviewing and adapting existing policy and practice, where appropriate. This critical responsibility remains a primary purpose of strategic management (Chakravarthy 1982, p. 35) with strategic leaders needing to understand the context, set direction, develop the organisation, develop its people and influencing and leading self (Drysdale and Gurr 2017) It is too early to say whether the existing governance arrangements overseeing UK informer management are sufficient flexible, agile and innovative to affect this organisational adaptation.

Lessons, as always, may be drawn from any retrospective view of police responses to major societal events. In the case of informant use, these include further exploration of how practitioners may further utilise existing and new secure remote access capabilities to both reduce risk, maintain professional relationships and enhance efficiencies. Unfortunately, the challenges posed by COVID-19 remain, and may do so for some time. However, a willingness to quickly adopt new practices, to ensure a measured response to perceived risks and, where necessarily, a disposition to amend long-standing policy will enable the recruitment of informants, maintain safe and effective relationships and collect intelligence to support organisational requirements.

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Data availability

Research data are not shared due to sensitive nature of officer submissions.

Disclosure statement

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the author(s).

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Appendix – Survey questions

During the period of the official UK lockdown:

- (1) What is your role within the Dedicated Source Unit?
- (2) Has the level of recruitment of new informants (decreased, remained the same, increased)?
- (3) Please state the differences in the type of recruitment methods used.
- (4) Has the frequency of your contacts with your informants (decreased, remained the same, increased)?
- (5) Has the communication method used by you to contact your informants changed (decreased, remained the same, increased)?
 - 5a. Physical meeting
 - 5b. Telephone contact
 - 5c. Online contact
 - 5d. Mail contact
- (6) Has there been any unforeseen benefits in the nature of the relationship between you and your informants?
- (7) Has there been any difference in the degree of welfare required to support the management of your informants?
 - 7a. How has your approach to monitoring and maintaining welfare changed?
- (8) Has the volume of intelligence from your informants (decreased, remained the same, increased)?
- (9) Has the quality of intelligence from your informants (decreased, remained the same, increased)?
- (10) Have you faced any challenges when attempting to transfer digital images between yourself and your CHIS?
 - 10a. What did you do in response to this challenge(s)?
- (11) Did COVID-19 lead directly to sickness absences within your Dedicated Source Unit?
 - 11a. Did COVID-19 related sickness absences impact on the amount of intelligence collected (decreased, remained the same, increased)?
- (12) What challenges have been encountered to the payments of rewards?
 - 12a. What did you do in response to this challenge(s)?
- (13) As the consequences of social distancing and other lockdown restraints, have you deferred any financial reward payments until the lockdown restrictions ease?
- (14) Has the delivery for paying your informants their financial rewards changed (decreased, remained the same, increased, not applicable)?
 - 14a. Direct payment in cash
 - 14b. Online payment
 - 14c. Payment through a third party
 - 14d. Payment in kind (i.e. rent, deposits, mortgage)
- (15) Do you think there are areas of informant handling that could now be improved to better enable a response to CHIS informant handling during any future pandemic?
 - 15a. What current policy and/or practices could be improved to better enable a response in a similar pandemic?
- (16) Please add any additional comments.