



East Anglian Daily Times/Archant Suffolk

Another day, another door: police raid a house in Colchester earlier this year



Boom and bust

In 2005 police smashed the T Business, Ipswich's dominant drug dealing gang. As the gang await sentencing later this month, **Max Daly** reports on the 'conveyor belt' nature of drug enforcement taking place across the UK.

When a squad of armed police officers swooped at dawn on the house in the upmarket estate in George Williams Way one month after the 7/7 attacks on the Tube in 2005, neighbours would have been forgiven for thinking the barrack town of Colchester had become the latest battleground in the hunt for terrorists.

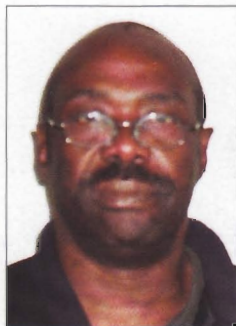
The street drama continued as the occupants of the detached house were led away in handcuffs. Shortly afterwards, a cab carrying three men pulled up outside the house only to find themselves arrested on the spot. Then, after asking the taxi driver where he had picked up his last fare, police raided a property in nearby Wivenhoe.

The raid, one of five carried out in Essex and Suffolk on August 4, marked the closing stages of Operation Wolf, the largest and most effective covert drugs operation in Ipswich's history.

The operation smashed the rural Suffolk town's number one crack and heroin dealing firm, the T Business, which used Colchester as a staging post for selling drugs in Ipswich.

The events at George Williams Way proved key in bringing down the London-based gang. Not only did officers scoop up 20 suspects, including several high-ranking members, but they found the firm's main mobile phone sim card which held a database of customers and a history of calls linking gang members. Drug squad officers also found, hidden in a car boot outside the flat, the latest consignment of drugs from the capital which fuelled a business that netted them up to £100,000 a month.

Two years down the line and the arrests made during the three month long Operation Wolf, which cost £35,000 and took up thousands of hours of police and CPS time, are finally turning into convictions.



Callie: the gang's Ipswich contact

On November 30 this month 10 of the T Business crew are due to be handed stiff sentences at Ipswich Crown Court after pleading guilty or being found guilty of conspiracy to supply class A drugs. The court has already sentenced six other members of the firm.

At the trial of one of the T Business crew, Johnny 'Uncle' Callie, an American ex-Vietnam veteran living in Ipswich, the judge heard the gang were the men behind the majority of crack cocaine and heroin sold to the town's 3,000 problem

drug users before their arrests in 2005.

It was revealed that surveillance teams and three undercover officers – using the names John, Martin and Roxy to buy drugs using traceable bank notes – gathered information on the inner workings of the gang. Four other dealers, members of two smaller firms, have been convicted.

Central to the business was the T Phone, which buyers would call and be directed to a pick up point. Police said everyone looking for heroin and crack in Ipswich knew the number off by heart – there was no need for dealers to hang around on street corners. The T Phone's sim card was passed around and was used by a number of dealers in the firm.

The gang was run like a structured company. A 'managing director' relied on trusted lieutenants who effectively worked as company directors, running and protecting the business. There was a top level of dealers, most of whom were from north west London, who were go-betweens for the trusted lieutenants and a lower layer of street dealers.

The gang made up to £3,000 a day by swamping Ipswich's small but lucrative drugs market – within an hour's striking distance of London. Despite having previous convictions for violent offences, the T Business's dominance of Ipswich's drug market was possible without the use of violence on users and rival dealers. The gang had no need, as they may have done in London, to carry firearms.

three weeks after we took out the T Business, the drug supply was pretty much established again

"In the days immediately after we took out the T Business, drugs in Ipswich were in real shortage," says Detective Chief Inspector David Cutler, the officer in charge of Operation Wolf. "We had a chemists broken into the next day, which we put down to people going after prescription drugs because they couldn't get illicit ones."

While it took two years to convict the T Business, Druglink can reveal it took only a matter of weeks for drug dealers to return the supply of drugs in Ipswich to pre-Operation Wolf levels.

"Three weeks after we took out the T Business, the drug supply was pretty much established again," says DCI Cutler. In the aftermath, two smaller gangs took up the slack from the T Business's demise. But in March 2006 even the T Business reached out from the grave. "We found out one of our local addicts started taking on what he referred to as the T Business again. It was instantly popular because it had such a reputation. I'm not sure which lieutenant was directing it, but it wasn't too long before we whipped the user in," says DCI

Cutler.

So what long-term impact has Operation Wolf had on Ipswich's drug market? "If I was being totally honest, very little," deadpans DCI Cutler. "It's supply and demand. As long as there is a demand then that supply will re-establish itself. From our point of view you've just got to tackle it and deal with what's in front of you."

One of Suffolk police's senior intelligence officers, Detective Inspector John Brocklebank, who started working the Ipswich patch at the start of 2006, estimates that in the two years since the arrest of the T Business, police have taken out around 24 outfits dealing drugs, from one-man-bands to gangs approaching the T Business's size.

DI Brocklebank says often a defunct drug gang's customer base – usually in the form of a sim card – is re-activated by associates or new dealers on the scene. "What can happen is that the mobile phone customer database [the drug users] are texted with a new number and the business is reignited." He says customer lists are 'rented out' to dealers for around £500 a day. As far as drug users are concerned, when one seller is arrested, they simply ring one of the other businesses on their phone. Some mobiles police have recovered from users have the numbers of 10 firms inputted in their phonebook.

"When we take out a firm a gap in the market is left open for other enterprising young men from London to come here and sell crack or heroin," says DI Brocklebank. And despite intensive anti-drug policing in Ipswich since the T Business arrests – a drive which has seen more than 200 people arrested for drug dealing offences so far this year – the pull, he admits, is huge.

customer lists are 'rented out' to dealers for around £500 a day

The pull, he admits, is huge. DI Brocklebank estimates drug dealers in Ipswich can earn up to £3,000 a day. Many start off by selling drugs cheaply, expanding their customer base and then employ someone else to sell it, thus reducing the risk of arrest by distancing himself from the drugs.

At Ipswich Crown Court in September, while jailing 18-year-old Londoner Patrice Polius for three years for crack and heroin supply, Judge Neil McKittrick warned the never-ending flow of dealers who have come from the capital to Ipswich to sell drugs since Operation Wolf they would be shown no mercy. "It is clear there have been in the court over the past month a number of defendants who have come to London from Ipswich only and expressly to deal drugs in this town and that will stop. Mercy from the court will be in short supply and dealers will be disinclined to come to Ipswich."

But despite the risks of increasingly heavy sentences, large potential profits and an unending demand for class A drugs means the flow of dealers into Ipswich and through the courts continues largely unabated.

Not only do police face the frustration of new drug gangs appearing as soon as others are eliminated – an expensive version of the fairground 'whack-a-mole' game – but dealers learn about their mistakes from police interviews and court cases and through word of mouth, tactics are changed.

"They learn from court cases and they do move in response to police activity," says Detective Chief Inspector Mark Jepson, who heads up Operation Academy, the current drive against dealing. "The London gangs were sending out a lot of young, black male dealers and they were getting tired of us taking these people out and confiscating large amounts of money."

And then we found they started sending young white dealers."

So, how do you stop the cycle of dealers replacing dealers? "We recognise that if you try and do that all day long you will never solve that problem because it's a profitable market. If you just take street dealers off the street every day, you'll never actually stop the problem, I think we accept that," says Jepson.

Yet, even though Suffolk police regard their anti-drugs operations, though time-consuming and resource intensive, as a successful way of breaking up drug gangs, they admit that they have little hope of reeling in the criminals who are pulling the strings.

are we actually getting anywhere? I try not to think about that – it could be very depressing

"We didn't get to top of the T Business at all," says DCI Cutler. "We got to the people who had access to a large stash of drugs in London. We never got to the London stash owners." He said the likelihood of catching the bigger fish was dependent on how much resources police forces are willing and able to throw at catching them. "If you have the resources to do it – because these things are expensive – and the ability to use more sophisticated police techniques, then there is the opportunity to tackle those higher up the chain."

DI Jepson agrees. "As far as Academy goes we are mostly arresting are what some people call the 'mules', the people bringing drugs into this town. Are we getting any where near top of the structure? No I doubt it."

Occasionally, as they did with Wolf, police will collar those higher up the food chain. Described by DI Jepson as a "dealer to the dealers", Delroy Barnes, who did not come from London but lived a life of luxury in Ipswich's waterfront area, was handed six years at the crown court in September after his earnings from selling crack and heroin were tracked after dogged work by police and financial investigators under the Proceeds of Crime Act.

"But on the positive side I'm not sure that since that time we've had a gang of the T Business's size. If we had done nothing about them we would have some real issues. Allowing a gang like that to establish means supply goes up and demand goes up and there is more crime. You could call what we do as 'fire fighting', but it's just one thing we do. We also try to be clever and scientific and do our own research to build pictures that allow us to take out bigger businesses."

"Drug markets re-establish themselves quickly and ever since Wolf we've had a constant supply of dealers in Ipswich, but I guess we are no different to any other similar town," says DI Jepson. "At the moment we have a number of drug 'teams' of drug businesses operating in Ipswich and we have varying degrees of success in dismantling those businesses."

The quick reconfiguration of Ipswich's drug market, post Operation Wolf, is mirrored in virtually every town and city in the UK. A 2004 study revealed a three year, intensive police operation in which 200 crack and heroin dealers were arrested in six Derbyshire towns had little impact on drug supply or crime in the area. The Derbyshire Drug Market Project found

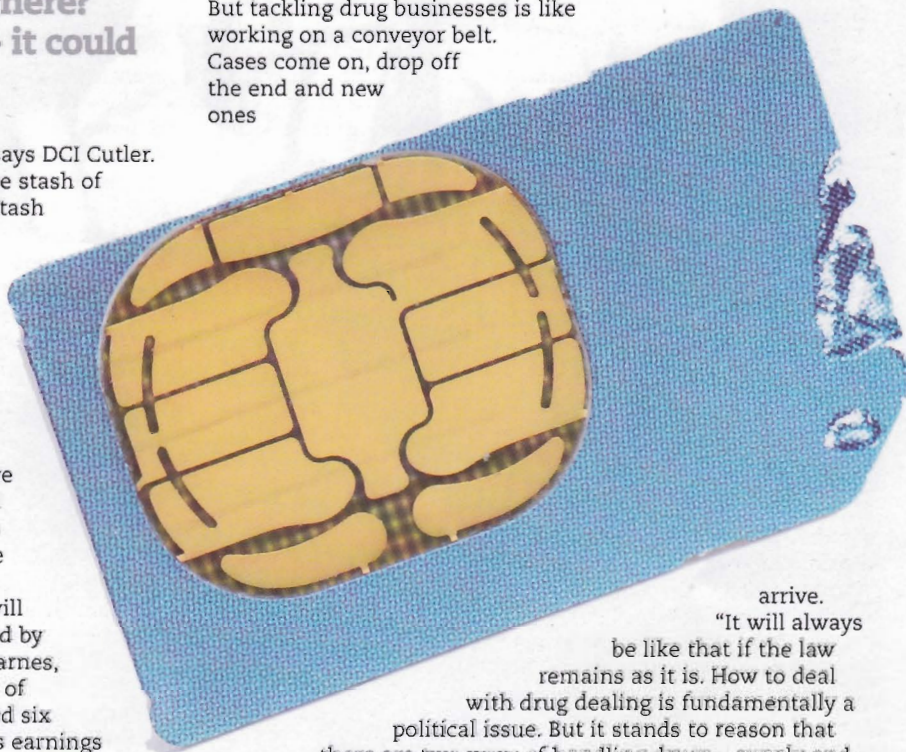
as soon as one dealer was removed, another took their place.

"The project tested the hypothesis that enhanced enforcement could disrupt drug supplies. The notion proved 'null', it was not possible."

Meanwhile there are questions around whether the £380 million the government spends on tackling drugs supply each year – a figure that does not include day to day, street dealing enforcement – is offering the tax payer value for money.

Peter Gair, crown advocate at the Suffolk branch of the Criminal Prosecution Service (CPS), who has lived and breathed Operation Wolf for the last two years, is philosophical about the nature of his job.

"I am very proud of the convictions, because it used lots of local CPS and police resources. But tackling drug businesses is like working on a conveyor belt. Cases come on, drop off the end and new ones



arrive.

"It will always be like that if the law remains as it is. How to deal with drug dealing is fundamentally a political issue. But it stands to reason that there are two ways of handling drugs – supply and demand. The police tackle supply by disruption and deterrents. In theory putting dealers in jail is supposed to deter other dealers. Drugs are illegal, lots of money can be made by selling them, and as long as people want to use them there will always be a supply. And like working on the production line, the quicker you work, the more you get rid of, but whether our efforts are reducing the amount of work I don't honestly know."

Gair says the police and CPS "learnt a number of lessons in best practice of catching these criminals" during Operation Wolf.

"The CPS has become more sophisticated in knowing what evidence will persuade a court to convict, and that includes proving someone is a dealer not just a user. We had to get our heads in the minds of dealers and work out what they are doing and catch them out. Use of mobile phone records, text messages, DNA on packages, matching drugs packages, observations and CCTV."

"If we didn't do our job it would be a lot worse. But are we actually getting anywhere, are we reducing the problem, are we just delaying the inevitable? I try not to think about that – it could be very depressing if you come to a certain conclusion."