

# Press release: Major investigation smashes nationwide prison drone gang

Ringleader Craig Hickinbottom co-ordinated a gang of 10 others from his prison cell to carry out 49 drone flights into a number of establishments, with some flights carrying individual payloads worth as much as £85,000 behind bars.

A meticulous investigation that involved the analysis of drone and mobile phone data of the defendants – alongside the use of covert cameras to capture them piloting drones outside a prison – led to the criminal empire being dismantled.

The 11 gang members have now been handed sentences totalling over 32 years by a judge at Birmingham Crown Court after either admitting or being found guilty of a range of offences.

Prisons around the West Midlands were repeatedly targeted as part of the drugs conspiracy but analysis of drones used by the gang identified drops at prisons across the country and in Scotland between July 2015 and November 2016.

Stolen cars were used to transport contraband as close to prisons as possible before members of the gang loaded up drones and flew them to specific cell windows for distribution on the inside.

Prisons Minister Sam Gyimah said:

It is clear this gang ran a nationwide drugs operation, using sophisticated technology to transport substances into our prisons and heap misery onto the offenders they had in their clutches.

We have invested significant resources into boosting our prison intelligence units and I am delighted that their meticulous work – operating jointly with colleagues from law enforcement agencies – is having such a positive impact.

Criminals who involve themselves in this type of behaviour should be left in no doubt that we are continuously developing our means of investigation and will stop at nothing to bring them to justice. This case is clear evidence of the desire our staff have to win the war on drugs in prisons.

DC Andy Farmer, Investigating Officer from West Mercia Police, said:

This was a painstaking and complicated investigation undertaken by a small, dedicated team of detectives from West Mercia Police, assisted by the Regional Organised Crime Unit.

The prison system should be a safe environment for people to live and work in and a place of reform; this type of activity jeopardises the good order of the prisons and leads to difficult working environments for staff.

The defendants in this case are responsible for large scale supply of prohibited items into prisons which includes drugs, weapons, phones and tools which could be used to facilitate an escape or to conceal illicit items. The sentences reflect the serious nature of the offending by this group and should serve as a deterrent for anyone considering embarking on a similar venture.

The joint HM Prison & Probation Service (HMPPS) and West Mercia police investigation started in July 2015, when police officers saw a package being thrown from a car towards a gate at the back of HMP Hewell in Worcestershire.

Over the next 16 months, prison and police officers intercepted 15 drone drops linked to the gang from prisons across the West Midlands, including HMP Hewell, HMP Featherstone in Wolverhampton, HMP Birmingham and HMP Stoke Heath in Market Drayton.

Some of the drones seized were analysed by Operation Trenton – the team of investigators that was by the Ministry of Justice earlier this year in response to the growing threat to prison security posed by drones. The intelligence gleaned was then passed to police.

It emerged during the course of the investigation that Craig Hickinbottom was the ringleader behind the criminal enterprise, using mobile phones to direct operations from his prison cell. Mervyn Foster was his key contact on the outside, involving himself in all of the individual drone flights.

Meanwhile, evidence revealed that Hickinbottom's partner, Lisa Hodgetts, managed the money on behalf of the gang and ensured everyone was paid. She has accepted that she laundered in the region of £125,000 for the gang.

Police discovered at one point that she paid Foster by giving him a static caravan and plot in North Wales and had told her local authority that she wanted to buy her £72,000 council-owned property outright, despite earning a modest income as a beautician.

As police built their case against the group, covert camera footage from the perimeter of one prison helped to identify a number of the gang members operating drones outside and analysis of mobile phone data helped to provide evidence of a link between those on the outside and offenders in prison.

Hickinbottom admitted four counts of conspiring to bring contraband into prison, and conspiracy to supply psychoactive substances.

Foster, who was described as the conspiracy's "prime organiser on the outside", worked with John Quinn, who admitted three counts of conspiracy and another of conspiring to supply psychoactive substances.

Foster had others assist with packaging and transport: Terry Leach, Ashley Rollinson, Yvonne Hay, 41, and her boyfriend Francis Ward. Foster obtained some of the drugs he sent in from Artaf Hussain, who pleaded guilty to being concerned with the supply of cocaine.

On the inside, Hickinbottom was assisted with distribution in jail by cousin and co-conspirator John Hickinbottom. His cellmate Sanjay Patel used one of the illegal mobile phones which had been flown in – an offence he admitted.

The total drugs seized from those drones had a potential prison value of £370,000. There were a further 34 flights to prisons across the United Kingdom, including flights to HMP Perth in Scotland and HMP Doncaster.

The contents of the packages from those drones are unknown. Based on the value of the items seized, police estimated that the prison value of items from the remaining flights would be in the region £1.2million.

### **Background on counter-drone work**

- Last year, a team of investigators – known as Operation Trenton – was formed in response to the growing threat to prison security posed by drones, which have been used as a method of smuggling drugs and mobile phones into establishments.
- Working alongside national law enforcement agencies and HM Prison and Probation Service (HMPPS), the 40-strong team inspects drones that have been recovered from prisons in a bid to identify and track down those involved in smuggling contraband.
- The efforts are helping to effectively tackle the use of drones technology. So far, 17 people have been convicted for using drones to get contraband into prisons. They are serving sentences of more than 50 years in prison as a result of their illegal actions.
- The specialist team of officers contain staff from the police and HMPPS. They bring together intelligence from across prisons and the police to identify lines of inquiry, which will then be passed to local forces and organised crime officers.
- The Government is taking unprecedented action to tackle the supply and use of drugs, including an innovative drug testing programme, the training of over 300 specialist drug dogs, and upgrades to CCTV cameras across the estate.
- We have also invested heavily in modern technology, including the roll-out of body worn cameras and £2m on handheld and portable mobile phone detectors to help clamp down on drug-dealing behind bars.
- A £3million intelligence hub has also been established to tackle organised gang activity behind bars.
- We are also investing over £14million annually to build the HM Prisons

and Probation Service Serious Organised Crime Unit and enhance our intelligence and search capability, allowing us to better gather, interrogate and use intelligence to disrupt criminal activity at national, regional and prison level.