The dilemmas of balancing public health and public order in policing an open drug scene

Drug scenes are a complicated public health and public order problem that makes them an object of many different forms of intervention. Such interventions may contradict each other, e.g. when harm reduction services seek to minimize health risks and drug policing maximize such risks. In a radical change of policy towards the drug scene at Vesterbro in Copenhagen a coherent public health and public order policy has been developing since the municipality established drug consumption facilities in the area in 2012. Around the drug consumption facilities the police have made a zone where users of the facilities are allowed to possess illicit drugs for personal use. To police this zone a special police unit has been established that is responsible for balancing public health and public order in practice. The work of the unit is embedded in a collaborative network that involves police, social services and treatment institutions. This paper will first present the policing style of the police unit and thereafter present some of the many problems and dilemmas of balancing public health and public order within a zone of non-enforcement, including how police on a daily basis have to negotiate the different needs and expectations of local residents, businesses, drug users and other professionals. This will be done on the basis of interviews with police officers, social workers, drug users, residents and business people in the area, combined with field notes from two months of observation in the area.