



Bedfordshire Police, United Kingdom

Operation Sentinel: Tackling the on and off street Sex Trade in Luton

Submission for the 2016 Herman Goldstein Award for Excellence in Problem-Oriented Policing

### **Summary**

Operation Sentinel is the first dedicated prostitution strategy developed by Bedfordshire Police in partnership with Luton's Community Safety Partnership (CSP) to tackle the on and off street sex trade.

The strategy has been developed as a result of growing concerns articulated by partners, residents and businesses about the impact of prostitution on both the town and its communities, and the risks faced by individuals engaging in the sex trade.

Prostitution is most commonly defined as the exchange of sexual services for some form of payment (usually money or drugs). This can take place on the street or in massage parlours or saunas, through escort agencies or at private addresses. It is difficult to be precise about the scale and prevalence of prostitution in the UK, however we know that it exists in most towns and cities, sometimes on the street, but also in commercial premises and private residential properties.

Residents in areas where on street sex work is known to take place have reported feeling threatened, intimidated, and being propositioned by both women selling sex and men seeking to buy it.

They have also reported the detrimental effect that the street sex trade has on the local environment; an increase in litter (including used condoms and syringes); increased noise and traffic; and the visibility of individuals publically engaging in sexual activity.

It is also evident that there is a public perception that the on-street sex trade has contributed to an increase in other types of offending including burglary and drug dealing although data from Police records did not support this claim.

## Scanning

From the outset, Bedfordshire Police determined that there were two distinct groups of people involved in the sex trade:

- 1) The exploiters &
- 2) The exploited

These groups could be divided further into

- 1) Exploiters-
  - a) Controlling Individuals (Pimps) &
  - b) Kerb Crawlers (Those seeking to purchase sex)
- 2) Exploited-
  - a) Sex Workers &
  - b) The Community

In developing the strategy Bedfordshire Police analysed and considered information and data from a range of partners to clearly identify the local dynamics and issues. This analysis identified that;

Of the known forms of prostitution operating within the town, it is the highly visible on-street sex trade which appears to be having the most significant and detrimental impact on our town and communities. Although reports relating to the on-street sex trade have been received from a number of wards within the town this activity is most concentrated in a relatively small geographical area close to the town centre and train station known as Hightown.

Those seeking to buy sex are travelling to the affected areas both in vehicles and on foot. All those currently identified as engaged in selling sex "on-street" in Luton are women over the age of 21.

The vast majority of those involved in selling sex have drug and/or alcohol misuse problems and a history of abuse and/or emotional trauma,

Those purchasing sex are predominantly men. Most are residents of the town, although approximately a quarter are visitors to Luton. Some used vehicles to approach the sex workers, whilst those more local to the area approached on foot.

Previous approaches to tackling the on-street sex trade have tended to focus on the activities of those selling sex rather than those who purchase it. There is often a general assumption that those involved are in control of their situation. However, evidence shows that this can be far from true: high levels of childhood neglect; emotional, physical and/or sexual abuse; domestic abuse; emotional trauma; homelessness; problematic drug use; and poverty experienced by those involved strongly suggest the overriding motivation is survival.

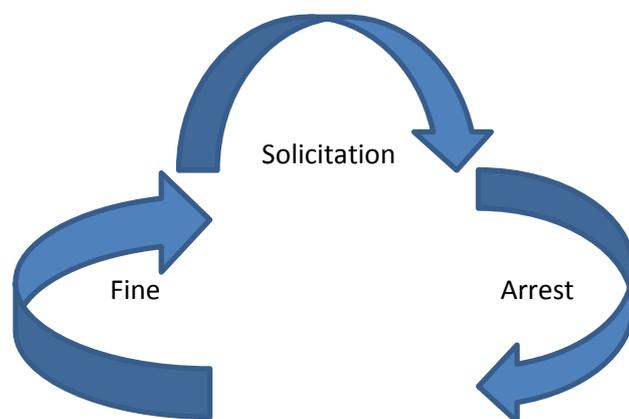
Nationally, a common pattern appears to be for men and women to be trapped in street-based prostitution after having been coerced into it at a young age, or to fund their own, and often their partner's, problematic drug use.

Those involved in this way rarely benefit, apart from ensuring their drug supply. The profits of the 'trade' go straight into the pockets of drug dealers. Therefore while for a very small minority selling sex may represent financially profitable work, for the vast majority involved in the on-street sex trade the reality is very different.

Bedfordshire Police recognised that those involved in the sex trade are vulnerable people and therefore should be treated as victims rather than offenders.

Operation Sentinels main strategic aim is to work with partner agencies to ensure every victim is given access to support services that will maximise their opportunity of exit from the sex trade.

Previous practices of arresting the sex workers and placing them before the Court have proven to be ineffective, creating a cycle of offending:



Operation Sentinel aims for a long term solution focussed on exit and support designed to break the cycle of offending. This would also involve targeting the exploiters rather than the exploited. It also focussed on dealing with the problem in its entirety with a contingency built in to tackle areas of dispersal if required.

### **Analysis**

Bedfordshire Police formed an eleven officer team which consisted of a Dedicated Sergeant, Eight constables and two Community support officers.

The officers varied in length of service and experience, but were selected due to their exceptional performance and their enthusiasm for community problem solving. All volunteered to be part of the Operation, knowing it required them to work permanent nights for the duration.

The team spent several weeks liaising with partners and local authorities to build relationships, and to get a full understanding of the scale of the problem.

Part of the analytical process was the team carrying out Environmental Visual Audits (E.V.A) of the problem area. This involved a full scoping of the Hightown area to identify

- hot spot areas where sex trade associated litter was being discarded
- Areas where street lighting needed improving
- Locations where CCTV installation was required
- Footpaths and alleyways where environmental issues such as fencing and access needed addressing
- Door to door high visibility community engagement and surveys
- Information leaflet drops
- Analysis of the number of sex trade complaint calls made to Bedfordshire Police

The team also carried out a number of night time patrols to monitor and record the number of sex workers frequenting the area.

From this engagement process it became clear that the scale of the problem was a lot larger than the partners believed.

Police patrols identified over 50 women engaging in the on street sex trade when it had been reported that the numbers were under 20.

Bedfordshire Police attended community meetings and listened to the concerns and experiences of the residents and communities in Luton. This highlighted the direct impact that the problem of on street sex work was having on individuals, families and businesses within the town. The community were angry and felt that the Police were not taking their issue seriously.

There were a lot of complaints from residents that used condoms were being left on their doorstep/ in the foyer of their block of flats, or discarded into their gardens.

Some complained of sexual activity taking place directly outside their front door. There were also complaints of female residents being approached by kerb crawlers and being sexually harassed as they were mistaken for sex workers.

Bedfordshire Police then commissioned a Community Safety partnership meeting where the issues identified were discussed in detail with key partnership groups. Owners were identified for each of these issues and relevant actions tasked to each stakeholder. The review meetings were set fortnightly to monitor progress and were chaired by Bedfordshire Police to ensure activity took place on each action.

An action tracker document was created, which ensured that all parties were held to account for their respective actions at subsequent meetings.

A daily returns and weekly performance measuring document was introduced for the Operation Sentinel Team so that all activity could be monitored and tracked. This enabled detailed analysis to be carried out on a number of factors such as

- Key locations
- Age, ethnicity and locality of victims and offenders
- Dependency issues and vulnerability of victims
- Number of sightings of sex workers/ kerb crawlers/Exploiters
- Community tensions
- Proactive arrests
- Intelligence submission

## **Response**

The key to the success of Operation Sentinel was the full buy in from all partners. As the lead agency, Bedfordshire Police ensured all stakeholders were involved in the consultation and development of the operation.

The groups involved in this project were Luton Borough Council (LBC), Luton Drug and Alcohol Partnership (LDAP) Integrated Offender Management (IOM) Respite House (RH). Penrose House (PH), Azalea (A)

RH provides a 10 or 14 day stay facilitating stabilisation in treatment and respite from the use of street drugs

All women are encouraged to have stays in Respite House. Stays in Respite House allow women to stabilise in treatment and engage with key work staff on care plans, keep appointments with GP's, benefits, housing and to

consider their long term options. All women have discharge meetings prior to leaving Respite House to maximise any opportunities for change.

During 2016, Respite House will be developed to offer detox from alcohol – this will improve access for a number of the women who are currently excluded due to alcohol use and the associated health risks of detoxing.

PH is a facility for women drug users who sell sex. This is a 5 bedroom house offered as supported housing by a private landlord. It is staffed 24/7 and offers a safe place for the women to live whilst building self-esteem, skills and developing care plans that aim to move the women to stable independent housing within 2 years and ultimately exit sex work and drug use.

LDAP work closely with Azalea (A Christian organisation of volunteers who offer spiritual and practical support to women who sell sex) sharing best practice while facilitating access to developed exit pathways for the sex workers.

LBC dealt with all housing issues experienced by the sex workers and were key in tackling the environmental factors such as lighting/access to alleyways/ fencing and generally improving the area.

LBC were also key to introducing a dawn patrol to clean up any litter associated with the on street sex trade, prior to residents and children emerging from their dwellings.

Bedfordshire Police worked closely with the integrated Offender Management Team (I.O.M) to ensure a smooth transition process was in place to support those that necessitated arrest so that they were not only eligible but were subject to an Engagement Support Order (E.S.O) rather than being given a fine by the Court.

The purpose of this is to help break the 'revolving door' effect whereby those found loitering or soliciting are given a fine, which can often have the unhelpful effect of providing another reason to continue in prostitution in order to pay the fine

The Government's Co-ordinated Prostitution Strategy (January 2006) Set out a commitment to improve the availability of routes out of Prostitution, in order to support one of the key objectives of the Strategy; achieving an overall reduction in street prostitution.

Section 17 of the Policing and Crime Act amends Section 1 of the Street Offences Act 1959 and introduces a new order that is available to courts when dealing with someone convicted of loitering or soliciting for the purposes of prostitution, under that Act. These Orders are called Engagement and Support Orders.

Engagement and Support Orders provide for a more constructive response within the Criminal Justice System (CJS) by offering a disposal that can help those involved in prostitution address the underlying factors that cause them to continue their involvement in street prostitution.

In order to complete the order, someone will need to attend three sessions with a supervisor, appointed by the court. The aim of the meetings is to engage those involved in street prostitution with vital services that can help address the issues underlying their involvement in prostitution, with the ultimate objective of helping them find a route out.

With the main strategic aim being to work with partner agencies to ensure every victim is given access to support services that will maximise their opportunity of exit from the sex trade, Bedfordshire Police response included the following strategies:

- Development of multi-agency partnership to improve effectiveness of service delivery to the community

- Dedicated team of One Police Sergeant, 8 constables and 2 Community Support Officers
- 3 Tiered approach to Policing the problem
- Improved Community Engagement & Reassurance
- Agile Tasking team approach to problem solving
- Follow the problem, Don't disperse it
- Full Training and Briefing to Officers & Volunteers involved in the operation
- Introduction of success measures- Performance management framework
- Dedicated Media campaign to promote exit and dissuade offending
- Dedicated e-mail inbox for the public & partners to contact the team

Sentinel was split into two proactive teams of 4 constables plus a community support officer. Each team worked with a pair of officers in plain clothes utilising an unmarked police vehicle. The second pair wore full Police uniform and utilised a marked Police vehicle. The Community support officers based themselves in the Local authority CCTV control room and acted as controllers, guiding the team to any sex workers or suspicious activity.

With the challenge of austerity and a reduction in Police funding, it was imperative to obtain buy in from volunteers from the Special Constabulary. Bedfordshire Police prides itself on the professionalism and dedication of its volunteer officers and as such a large number of officers volunteered to bolster the resources assigned to Operation Sentinel.

This was to ensure the success in the long term, whereby the Special Constabulary take ownership of Policing the on street sex trade, thus freeing the full time officers to focus on the next stages of enforcement.

### **Tier 1**

This saw engagement with the Community and partner agencies followed by two weeks of high visibility Police patrols.

The officers focussed on engagement with the sex workers, handing them leaflets that explained all the exit opportunities and support available to them with the relevant contact details of the partner agencies. A full explanation of the purpose of the operation was given to each sex worker encountered.

Houses used as brothels and for drug use were also identified and intelligence submitted for further development and enforcement.

A media strategy was implemented to publicise the launch of Operation Sentinel which incorporated social media, the Bedfordshire Police corporate web site and local media.

<http://www.bedfordshire-news.co.uk/8203-New-police-operation-tackle-anti-social/story-28836156-detail/story.html>

<http://www.bedfordshire-news.co.uk/Luton-brothel-closed-week-new-police-operation/story-28899037-detail/story.html>

<http://www.luton-dunstable.co.uk/Bedfordshire-Police-continue-crack-illegal-sex/story-28976279-detail/story.html>

<http://www.luton-dunstable.co.uk/Bedfordshire-Police-continue-crack-illegal-sex/story-28976279-detail/story.html>

## **Tier 2**

Tier 2 went live on week three, whereby the team continued to engage with partners but began targeting the exploiters. All vehicles seen acting suspiciously in the prescribed area were stopped and checked, or warning letters sent to the registered keepers stating that they had been seen in an area of high anti-social behaviour.

A decision was made not to include the term “area of prostitution” due to the risk factors and possible consequences of self-harm.

All sex workers seen loitering in the prescribed area were subject of the three strikes policy. This meant that each sex worker received two recorded official warnings before being subject to arrest.

The whole aim of the strategy was to firmly encourage the sex workers into exit, not to arrest them.

The team continued to work on intelligence gathering to identify brothels and addresses used for drug use and dealing.

## **Tier 3**

Tier 3 commenced on week five. This saw the team execute a number of warrants and close a number of brothels. One exploiter was arrested, charged and remanded in custody.

One of the sex workers was arrested, having not heeded the two official warnings given to her previously. Although charged and bailed to court, the team insured they liaised with the IOM so that the individual was subject of an E.S.O to support exit.

This arrest had an immediate impact on the number of sex workers seen in the area, and the team saw a visible reduction.

## **Assessment**

In the ten weeks since the operation went live the results have been excellent.

The results of the E.V.A were acted upon by partners and improvements made to the lighting, fencing and general cosmetics of the area to assist the Police in patrolling the affected area. Installation of extra lighting and CCTV cameras were key to this, as was the restriction of “rabbit runs” being used by the sex workers and clients. Some of the improvements are shown below.

Before



After





Bedfordshire Police Operation Sentinel team delivered the following results:

- 166 stop checks
- 249 warning letters issued to suspected kerb crawlers
- Nine kerb crawlers reported for numerous offences.
- 35 warnings issued to sex workers
- All 35 women referred to IOM and LDAP for support to exit.
- 322 intelligence submissions.
- 5 warrants executed at 3 brothels and 2 premises used for drug supply.
- 8 sex workers arrested, with all being referred to IOM for E.S.O support.
- 10 Sex workers are now subject to ESO's and are engaging with exit strategies.
- 20 proactive arrests for a multitude of offences ranging from drug use and burglary to Domestic assault.
- Partners have seen an increase in engagement from the sex workers due to the action taken by the Op Sentinel team.
- Bedfordshire Police has seen a huge reduction in the number of complaints from the community in relation to the on street sex trade.
- There has also been a similar reduction in the number of on street sex workers in the town.

A number of letters of appreciation were received from members of the community as well as positive feedback from Partners. The following are excerpts from these letters.

*Dear Sgt Doggrell,*

*Thank you for taking the time to reply, I do appreciate it.*

*I think that one of the issues in my street may have been resolved last night as the banging across the road woke me up (don't worry) and I was able to observe police action at number 46.*

*I assure you that all of us in this house and direct neighbours are more than happy with the action and will feel a lot easier living in our street now. Thank you and all your colleagues for the efforts involved in protecting us all and should you need help in any way in the future please don't hesitate to contact me.*

*Kind regards,*

*V.P Resident Buxton Road via e-mail*

*I want to congratulate the Op Sentinel Team for all they've done to make Hightown a better place to live. There has been a huge difference in the number of prostitutes working in Hightown, and it is nice to be able to walk around my estate without seeing used condoms and needles everywhere. I do suggest anyone who has concerns/information around this area contact op sentinel...I am absolutely delighted with their responses and very grateful indeed as well*

*W.W Resident Butterworth Path via Facebook*

*I've been to see Shabzad Khadam today (shopkeeper Old Bedford Road) and he gave really positive feedback about Op Sentinel and that he felt his working relationship with the Police and Council has massively improved.*

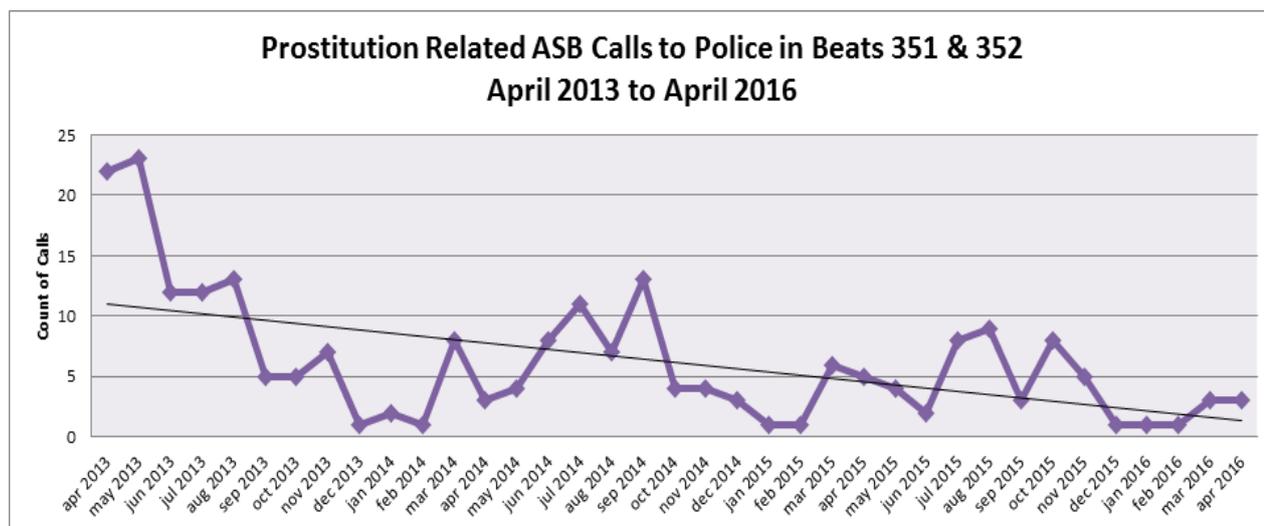
*Thanks,*

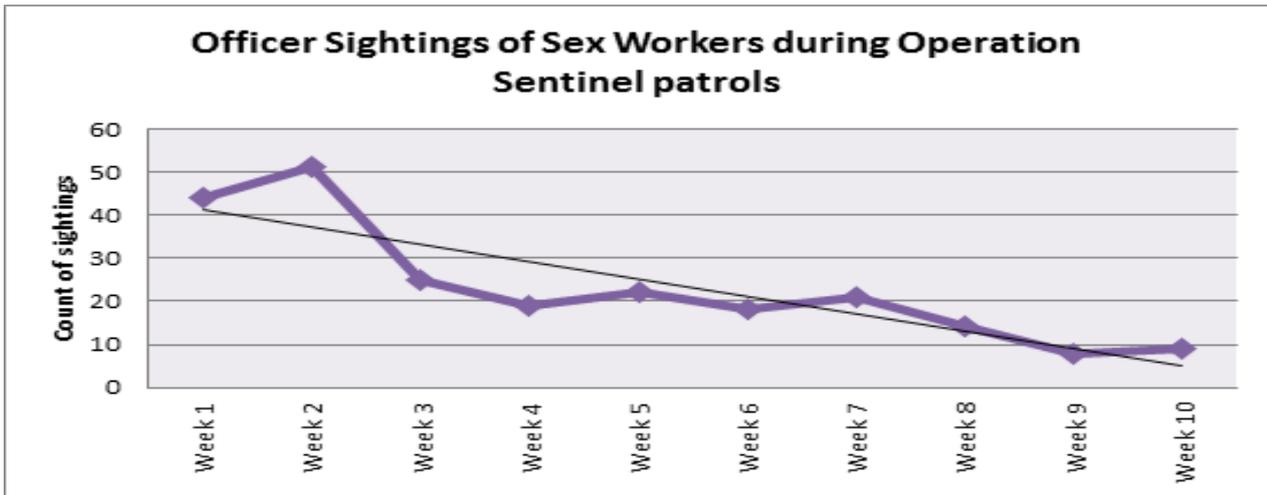
*Emma C (Luton Borough Council) via e-mail*

*While on Op Fidelity patrols last weekend in Wenlock Street and Dudley Street, several residents commented they were aware that patrols had increased during the evening and life had been better for them recently due to this. They noticed less people hanging around and less Anti Social Behaviour as a result*

*R.C Acting Sergeant 640 Community Team Luton via e-mail*

Strong Partnership working practices were key to the success of this operation. Coupled with this, was the commitment, dedication and professionalism of the Operation Sentinel team who work permanent 12 hour night shifts to protect the vulnerable and pursue those that exploit that vulnerability.





The team are now focussing on tackling the issue of off street sex trade, whilst maintaining control of the on street issue. Each officer within the team was given ownership of intelligence development around individual exploiters with a view to enforcement and arrest once enough evidence had been obtained. This piece of work is continuing with a further warrant planned for week commencing 16<sup>th</sup> May 2016.

At the most recent Community meeting on 25<sup>th</sup> April 2016, Bedfordshire Police were thanked and congratulated by the public for the success of operation Sentinel .

***Key Members of the Operation Sentinel Team***

Chief Inspector Sean Quinn

Police Sergeant Richard Doggrell

Police Constables Matt Crouch, Sharon Cummings, Robbie Williams, Chris Warmington, Michael Trinder,

Simon Betts, Hollie Nicholson and Matthew Taylor

Police Community Support Officers Nadine Mee and Aaron Lee.

Submitted for Goldstein Award Nomination by

Detective Chief Superintendent

Dr Jacqueline Sebire

Head of Crime, Community & Public Protection

25<sup>th</sup> May 2016