

OPERATION COLUMBUS

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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Operation Columbus addresses good practice relating to the safety and well being of visiting international students. It was clear from a central departmental viewpoint that Sussex Police was operating various local initiatives to target the offenders responsible for the **assaults** and robberies committed against this vulnerable group. These operations took little account of prevention methods and were primarily focused on the detection of offences. However, there was also work being undertaken by the police service, local authorities and language schools to form partnerships addressing student safety, most of which were based around local liaison groups known as Overseas Student Advisory Committees.

The Community Safety Department studied the problem of crime committed against this group and collated the good practice from across the policing sectors, covering crime prevention, student safety, students becoming victims of crime and students offending whilst in this country. The problem orientated policing approach was adopted and all the **areas** of concern were discussed and analysed. This resulted in the formulation of a good practice document and other associated literature such as posters, formal letters, statements, offender identification leaflets as well as a personal safety guide for each and every language student.

It is too early in the life of the project to be able to gauge its success in terms of the reduction of incidents involving international visiting students requiring police intervention. However, the other measures, contained in the body of the report, can be viewed in isolation as the most effective way forward to achieve good practice for all those involved.

Operation Columbus is problem solving policing in its entirety. It provides solutions to identified problems and methods of tackling and preventing incidents from occurring. It is part of the force Best Value programme, and it could in itself stand alone as a piece of police research. I hope you will enjoy the contents of the document as it is presented in an easy format and find it offers some guidance offering Best Value principles to the practitioners within the Force.



Martin Stevens
Chief Inspector
Sussex Police

INTRODUCTION

Operation Columbus is a good practice guide to the safety and well being of visiting international students to the area of Sussex. However, this report will describe how this one initiative has gripped the imagination of many other south coast forces, who are in the process of adopting Columbus as their main thrust for the prevention and detection of offences committed against this vulnerable group of visiting international students. During the summer season, Sussex, like many other south coast forces, plays host to thousands of international students predominately aged between 12-17 years old; within Sussex alone there are 148 registered language schools in addition to the many companies that organise host families for such students.

THE PROBLEM

Operation Columbus began back in September 1998, when it became clear from a central viewpoint, within the Force Community Safety Department, that many of the policing sectors in Sussex were operating local initiatives to target the offenders who were responsible for the rising number of assaults and robberies committed against visiting overseas students.

The many policing operations already in existence contained little or no crime prevention procedures and were primarily based on efforts to detect offenders against this group. In addition to these operations an enormous amount of work was being undertaken by local authorities and language schools to try and address the issues of student safety whilst they were in the country. Much of this work was based around local liaison groups which had representatives from district and borough councils as well as local police liaison officers. There was however, one major problem - the lack of a central point of contact to give advice on which initiatives actually worked to reduce incidents and ensure the safety of these students within any one of the areas of Sussex. Looking further afield to other neighbouring forces there were other pieces of work being undertaken which were proving effective within the areas they were being tested. It was felt that a central document containing good practice on all aspects of visiting international students' safety and behaviour was needed in order to assist not just the police service, but the various agencies and individuals concerned for the safety and wellbeing of these students.

There was an awareness that attacks on international students attracted extensive media coverage both locally and internationally, which in turn was having a dramatic impact on not only the police service but also the economy and reputation of many of the south coast tourist towns within Sussex. Such publicity, although helpful in bringing forward witnesses to crime, was damaging in terms of disproportionately raising the fear of crime in Sussex communities. It was necessary to define the nature of the crimes committed against the overseas students throughout the Force area.

Information from the crime statistics for 1996, 1997 and 1998 were examined, including all offences committed against this group, in particular the offences of actual bodily harm and robbery. For the purpose of the project we decided to benchmark the 1998 crimes, which accounted for 0.72% of the force total. Taken alone, this may seem a small percentage, but as already stated, media attention on specific incidents was having an immediate impact on the economic stability for the areas in question. Student assaults are a small percentage of the total recorded, however, examination of the figures found that robberies committed against visiting international students accounted for **14.43%** of the force total for 1998; this therefore identified the need for swift action to tackle this serious criminality. In 1998, seventy-eight, (78) robberies were recorded within Sussex and from the intelligence

gathered, it seemed that in most towns they were committed by small groups of individuals who were preying on the visiting students' vulnerability. These crimes were examined in detail and, although remaining a high concern to the Force, over 85% of them, albeit recorded as robberies, involved the threat of force or minor assaults at the time of the offence.

METHOD OF RESOLUTION

The introduction of the new Crime and Disorder Act placed a duty on local authorities to form partnerships with the police to reduce crime and disorder. To take action at local level to impact on this type of crime, it was believed by the Community Safety Department that Operation Columbus would be a good example of partnership work which would be effective if co-ordinated activity could be achieved throughout the force area. Operation Columbus was produced as a partnership operation which can be used as a reference and tactical document for the Police and all other agencies with a common interest in ensuring the safety of visiting international students.

It is argued that the international reputation of Sussex as a safe place to visit - and, consequently, the local economies - were being adversely affected when regions were being unfairly portrayed as dangerous. The partnership work contained within Operation Columbus at the start of the 1999 season gives a positive message to the press, both locally and internationally, emphasising that the police, language schools and seaside communities of Sussex are working together in partnership to ensure that the international students are treated properly during their time in Sussex and that the memories they take home are in fact positive ones.

With the basic structure in place, Chief Inspector Martin Stevens, and Constable Michael Pope from the Community Safety Department, began the scanning process for initiatives concerning all aspects of visiting international students both from within Sussex and other police force areas. Information was gathered from BTP, Kent, Hampshire, Dorset, Avon & Somerset, Thames Valley and Devon & Cornwall Forces and letters were sent to many of the international language schools within Sussex, requesting details of safety advice and vetting forms. Information began pouring in, the scanning process continued for several months. A workshop was then arranged in November 1998 which involved representatives from police divisions within Sussex and other interested forces, in order to discuss and analysis the vast amount of information obtained during the scanning process.

The analysis stage was undertaken by using the Problem Analysis Triangle (PAT).



By using this system we were, able to concentrate our efforts on the three areas of the problem as shown in the triangle and disseminate the information that we had received during the scanning process. Representatives from three other forces attended this workshop and were able to contribute to the document. The analysis revealed the extent of the problem regarding lack of communication and the lack of a central reference document which contained good practice from across the country. Initiatives operating within one policing sector in Sussex, having been evaluated as an effective crime prevention method, were not being used by the neighbouring sectors due to a lack of communication both within the police service and local authorities. It was clear during the analysis stage that a good practice guide could address these issues and make available the initiatives which worked to all the agencies concerned. The analysis also highlighted a need for a standard approach to Crime Prevention advice, for example information to host families, and personal safety advice for international students.

The response was the formulation of a problem solving manual, entitled Operation Columbus, containing details of good practice, which is at present assisting the police service, other agencies and individuals to achieve the safety of these students.

OPERATION COLUMBUS GOOD PRACTICE MANUAL

The document is in, two parts: the yellow part is for use by the international language schools, local authorities and other individuals concerned with the safety of this group, within which is contained the personal safety guidance, which **can be photocopied** and **sent** to language students prior to their arrival in this country. The manual includes details of action, to be taken both prior to language students arriving in Sussex, and in the event of students becoming victims of crime or commit offences. The guidance covers advice on issues such as host families, police liaison contacts in Sussex, partnership agency details and contact points, including Internet Website addresses, which can be read by students prior to travelling to this country. Operation Columbus can also be found on the Sussex Police Website <http://www.sussex.police.uk>. It includes departure questionnaires which will identify target (Hot Spot) areas for police and local authorities to respond to. So far this season, this has to date been extremely helpful in combating the areas of nuisance and harassment, before they get to the stage of becoming the more serious offences of assaults and robberies.

The blue part of the document is for use by police staff and details good practice in dealing with students as visitors, offenders and victims. The parts themselves are spilt into several sections and make easy reading. Each geographical site that **was** discussed will look at the features of the location, local offenders and victims, and with that give the appropriate advice. This part details information to police staff and deals with issues such as the media, the effective use of Schools Liaison Officers, recording racial incidents, using hand held camcorders to target nuisance offences, correct use of CCTV to prevent and detect offences, investigating offences, taking statements from foreign students and guidance for custody officers regarding strict and effective conditions of bail for offenders.

It is intended as a living document which will be updated annually to ensure constant monitoring and evaluation. Language schools are requested to give a direct update to the department on new active initiatives used during the season by way of an evaluation form within the guidance.

it is a document that is capable of being adopted by all Forces who have identified similar problems to that of Sussex.

It is also supported by newly designed crime prevention and safety posters, international language students safety leaflets and offender identification forms for the purposes of identifying suspects.

It is intended that during the summer months an interactive video will be produced by the department, to enable overseas language students, once arrived in this country, to learn about and discuss the safety guidance principles detailed in Operation Columbus.

The name Columbus was thought of within the Community Safety Department as being suitable for this type of forcewide operation, as a result of which we were able to request the Sussex Police Public Relations Graphic Designer to create a character (as displayed on the attached documents), which it was felt would be suitable and impactful for posters and leaflets connected with this operation.

The document, a comprehensive guide to personal safety advice for international students, was compiled by The Community Safety Department using the slogan "Think Ahead, Be Prepared, Be Aware/Avoid Risks, Never Assume, Be Safe". Details regarding safety on the railways was also supplied by British Transport Police. This is truly a partnership document created for the purposes of solving problems not just within Sussex but further afield within neighbouring force areas.

POSTERS AND LEAFLETS

A number of **posters** were designed by the Force, depicting the character Columbus in eight scenarios where it was felt by the group that international students were in need of receiving a strong crime prevention and behavioural message. These posters depict the following:

1. Crossing the road safely (looking right first);
2. Not pushing in at bus queues, etc.
3. Not dropping litter;
4. Not blocking the pavements
5. Not purchasing alcohol under 18;
6. Not stealing from shops;
7. Not leaving property whilst playing gaming machines;
8. Not carrying offensive weapons.

The posters are visually effective and are currently in use in the majority of international language schools, retail premises, off-licences, gaming halls and other such venues within Sussex.

The offender identification leaflet was designed to assist problems encountered with the language barriers arising between visiting students and police officers when, for instance, an offence had been committed, in establishing details of a suspect's first description. The details can be ticked by the student in any language and cross-referenced with the English version, in order that an accurate and legally sound identification process can be undertaken at or close to the scene of the offence. The leaflet contains the up to date information on instant confrontations and street identifications and also becomes a court exhibit once completed. These forms are currently in use within Sussex and many other forces have subsequently adopted Operation Columbus practices to assist them with similar associated problems. (Copy of document in rear of manual.)

The Student Safety Leaflet has been in existence for several years; it was until last year part of several local documents sponsored by individual borough councils. In May 1998, the department gathered together the various documents and produced a generic safety leaflet that could be used by every language school within the Sussex Police area. In 1998, 100,000 student safety leaflets were printed by Sussex Police and distributed to all the international language schools, the demand for a re-print in 1999 was immense and a further 100,000 leaflets were produced for the 1999 season and distributed in the same manner. It is intended that next year's copies will have the Columbus character within the document, replacing the one which has been in existence for several years. (Copy of document in rear of manual.)

COST

The cost of the complete project, 100,000 leaflets, 8,000 posters and 500 good practice guides was approximately £5,000, which was paid for during this financial year by the Sussex Police Authority and Sussex Police Joint Initiative Fund for Community Based projects. It is intended that next year's document will seek funding from local authorities and international language schools as well as those forces interested in adopting the same project.

CONCLUSION AND THE FUTURE

The success of Operation Columbus with regards to the reduction of crimes committed against international students has yet to be fully evaluated. However, the indications from several sites implementing the action detailed within the guidance is extremely encouraging, with many agencies reporting a decrease in incidents. The second success criteria was the exchange of good practice with all the relevant agencies, including information on effective measures in the prevention and detection of crime and dealing with the many other incidents involving police and international students.

Operation Columbus was launched at a partnership conference with representatives from over 80 international language schools and other representatives from associated agencies. Since that launch an overwhelming interest in the document has been expressed from all areas of the country.

Recent presentations to a national seminar held at Avon and Somerset Police Headquarters again extended the interest to many other forces. In July 1999, Devon and Cornwall Constabulary arranged a multi-force conference where a presentation was made on Operation Columbus and this concluded with many other forces wishing to adopt this document as a multi-force good practice guide. The demand for Operation Columbus from international language schools throughout the country has been immense and it is understood that some are encouraging their local forces **to adopt a similar operation.**

On 29 October 1999, a workshop day will be held in Sussex where representatives from the original working group within Sussex and representatives from Forces from across the South of England will be in attendance. This workshop day will be for the purposes of updating this year's document and producing a multi-force "Operation Columbus", looking towards the spread throughout the country of good practice on the problem solving initiatives contained within it.

The media interest alone has indicated that this particular area of crime prevention has been neglected by many forces in the past and a co-ordinated and problem solving approach could result in a big reduction in many of the incidents that police are required to attend during the height of the season.

Sussex Police have adopted this initiative at all levels of the service but the main liaison officers have been identified as Sector Commanders for the purposes of local partnerships and in many seaside towns Columbus patrols have been initiated in order to target the areas of concern highlighted by the various language schools during the busy summer season. The conference which launched the initiative within Sussex involved many of the practitioners who were then left to pass on information from the conference to their staff within the policing sectors.

The problem orientated policing model has been used as a clear guideline for formulating this approach and many of the sections within it are designed to address the three **areas** of the problem analysis triangle.

Operation Columbus deals specifically with a vulnerable group within our society, it addresses racist incidents, it includes details of what works, it fits in with the concept of community orientated policing and, in turn, will produce a more effective and efficient service by all the agencies involved.

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15 July 1999

The Tilley Award at Police Review
Ms Delphine Gandelin
Police Review Publishing company
Celcon House - 5th Floor
289-293 High Holborn
LONDON
WC1V 7HZ

Dear Ms Gandelin

The attached details on the Sussex Police Operation Columbus comprises several elements:

- 1) 8 copies of a covering report
- 2) 8 copies of the Operation Columbus paperwork including scaled down copies of the posters.
- 3) 1 copy of each of the full sized laminated posters.

I fully support this application and can vouch for its necessity from my own experiences as a Divisional Commander in an area with a large number of international students and therefore a large number of offences committed against them.

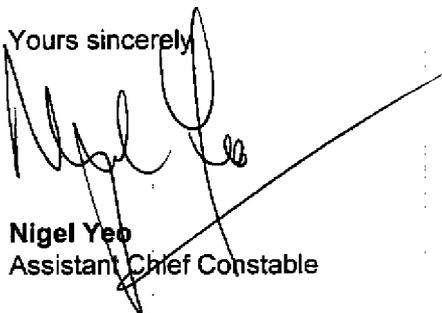
The key messages of Operation Columbus are in themselves surprisingly simple and this represents some of its greatest appeal. Equally, the operation seeks to get these across in a form that is non-judgemental and empathetic to the young people that make up the target group.

Whilst it has to be accepted that only limited evaluation has been possible to date in "hard figure" terms the effect in terms of reassurance and positive relationships, with the students and our partners, has been beyond doubt.

The officers are frequently requested to share the Sussex Police experience with other forces and agencies so hopefully they can reap the benefits at minimal cost.

I hope this can be favourably considered.

Yours sincerely



Nigel Yeo
Assistant Chief Constable

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