



Operation Begonia

Executive Summary

Operation Begonia aims to identify women involved in 'on street' sex work and provide them with a tailored response in an effort to educate them away from the lifestyle. The operation is led by a dedicated team of officers from Police Scotland – Aberdeen City Division, along with support from key partner agencies and stakeholders. It has been possible due to funding from the Fairer Scotland Fund.

Grampian Police (now Police Scotland – Aberdeen City Division), along with their partner agencies, recognised that there are a number of barriers for women wishing to exit the industry and were keen to gain an understanding of the needs and difficulties experienced by the women, and to look at ways to address these. Since the commencement of the operation, all seven of the objectives have been addressed and 138 women have engaged with the partnerships to exit the lifestyle with this total ever increasing as the patrols continue. The project has secured another year of funding from the Fairer Scotland Fund to continue its work in 2013/14.

The project was runner up in the Prevention and Intervention category at the Safer Communities Awards 2012.

Project Background and Aims

Prior to the commencement of the operation, approximately 120 women worked the street in the area of the harbour in Aberdeen and of an evening 10 – 20 women might be expected to be seen. The majority of females are vulnerable with a high percentage being drug dependent, working to finance both theirs and sometimes their partner's drug habits. It is also suspected that 'on street' sex workers engage in other criminal activity, using violence or the threat of violence to rob their clients prior to sexual activities being carried out. These robberies are rarely reported as the males involved do not wish to reveal that they had been engaging the services of a prostitute.

Under the previous regime and to satisfy the requirements of the Civic Government (Scotland) Act 1982, when first seen to be working in the 'on street' sex industry, females were issued with two 'street' warnings. After these two warnings, if they were encountered again they would be cautioned, charged and a report submitted to the Procurator Fiscal. The majority of disposals set by the courts would be a fine, and there would traditionally be no follow up with other agencies to provide support to the females. This disposal was deemed to be inefficient and the fines the women received from the courts only created a 'revolving door' but did nothing to remove them from the industry.

In light of these facts, Operation Begonia was created, an innovative approach to the problem by identifying vulnerable women who require additional assistance to break the cycle. The women now receive immediate referrals and access to agencies which offer them support as opposed to being reported to the Procurator Fiscal.

The operation aims to gain an understanding of the needs and difficulties experienced by 'on street' sex workers and to provide support and assistance for women in order to help them exit the lifestyle. The operation set the following seven objectives:

- To reduce the number of women involved in 'on street' sex work.
- To increase the number of women involved in 'on street' sex work who engage with partnerships who assist in efforts to exit from this lifestyle.
- To reduce the number of complaints associated with 'on street' sex work.
- To reduce the number of crimes associated with 'on street' sex work.
- To improve upon the intelligence gathering process for all occasions when a female 'on street' sex work is encountered by the police.
- To scope the full extent of the problem by engaging with local businesses and residents to establish exactly the problems encountered by these 'victims'.
- To research all data gathered for subsequent report.

Activities

Prior to commencement of the project, full briefings and presentations took place to the key partner agencies and stakeholders. The project was divided into three phases:

- Research – Uniformed patrols and surveys in the local area to establish the 'baseline' in the number of women involved and the perceptions of local people for moving forward and provided a clear intelligence picture of the problem.
- Enforcement – Information was gathered using questionnaires when engaging with 'on street' sex workers to allow the referral of the women to partners and to provide exit opportunities. Those females who refused or were unwilling to engage were subject to prosecution.
- Reporting – Feedback to Fairer Scotland Fund and partner stakeholders of the outcomes and delivery of the objectives. Assessment carried out quarterly for the Fairer Scotland Fund.

The initial research stage utilised high visibility uniformed police patrols within the harbour and city centre locations which had been identified as having a 'prostitution problem'. Surveys were carried out at local residents and business and questionnaires were conducted with the females involved in the 'on street' sex trade.

Two police officers (additional to normal resources) were deployed to provide additional patrols in the identified areas. The funding allowed for the two officers to be deployed for four hours on 104 days, over a 52 week period. On a number of occasions, the officers were accompanied by social workers.

Whilst on their patrol, the officers engaged with the women to explain the concept of Operation Begonia. The women were asked to complete a questionnaire relating to their work and their experience and perception of crime. They were also provided with both a safety booklet and panic alarm. The women were also asked if they would provide consent to share details with Aberdeen City Criminal Justice Social Work Department in order for them to provide counselling and advice and assistance.

An information sharing protocol (ISP) was devised to allow the information collected during the patrols to be shared with additional and associated voluntary partners. This provided an opportunity to quickly identify how the women could be helped with the ultimate hope that 'high risk' women could be supported to exit the industry. Examples of opportunities offered through Operation Begonia included:

- 'fast track' drugs programmes.
- a range of support services aimed at assisting identified individuals with welfare, benefits, housing.
- further education.
- job opportunities.

Impact

The project allows an understanding of the needs and difficulties experienced by 'on street' workers and has provided support and assistance to these women in order to make significant progress towards changing their lives. Furthermore, the provision of the police patrols has provided an enhanced sense of safety and wellbeing within the community. Since the commencement of Operation Begonia, the following objectives have been met:

Reduce the number of women involved in 'on street' sex work.

The number of women working on the street has reduced from approximately 120 to 30.

Increase the number of women involved in 'on street' sex work who engage with partnerships who assist in efforts to exit form this lifestyle.

138 women have engaged with partnerships to exit the lifestyle and this total is ever increasing as the patrols continue. These women are assessed and placed in three separate categories:

- Green - Engaged and not seen again in the area
- Amber - Engaged and trying to address minimal attendance in the area
- Red - Difficulty in engagement and attending more frequently in the area

In March 2013, there were 107 greens, 22 ambers and 4 reds, with five women remanded in custody for other offences. A 'case management' process involving partners who can assist in a more direct way to impact upon the women in the red and amber categories has been agreed and commenced on 31 October 2011.

In relation to the number of female 'on street' workers reported to the Procurator Fiscal by Grampian Police, there has been a dramatic reduction from 113 for the period from March 2010 to March 2011, to 18 for the March 2012 to March 2013.

There are numerous success stories with women with formerly chaotic lifestyles now doing really well, with one now at college and two having taken up unsupported tenancies.

Reduce the number of complaints associated with 'on street' sex work.

The number of complaints received associated with 'on street' sex work reduced from 296 to 267 calls between February 2010 and March 2011, a reduction of 10%. A large number of the calls received were from two local residents, namely 39 calls between February 2010 and March 2011. Officers from the General Enquiries Department were specifically tasked with working with these repeat complainers to resolve their issues.

Reduce the number of crimes associated with 'on street' sex work.

Between 1 April 2010 and 31 March 2011 (the period of Operation Begonia) and the previous year between 1 April 2009 and 31 March 2010:

- Sexual offences relating to prostitution decreased by 21%.
- Serious assault offences decreased by 47%.
- Assault and robbery and assault with the intent to rob offences decreased by 16%.
- Rape offences decreased by 33%.
- Offences regarding soliciting the services of a person engaged in prostitution increased by 24%.

The majority of the statistics above are derived from crimes reported directly by the victim, however, in a few cases these are from anonymous reports via the 'Ugly Mugs' scheme.

Improve upon the intelligence gathering processes for all occasions when a female 'on street' sex worker is encountered by the police.

There is increased interaction between officers and 'on street' sex workers during patrols which has led to an increased confidence in the police as an organisation. In addition, the 'Ugly Mugs' scheme was made available to allow the women to anonymously report crimes.

Scope the full extent of the problem by engaging with local businesses and residents to establish exactly the problems encountered these 'victims'.

During the initial six week scoping exercise, 219 questionnaires were completed by local businesses and residents which gave individuals the chance to convey what they saw as the problems in the areas where they live and work and what they felt could be done to improve matters. Each individual who completed a questionnaire was contacted towards the end of the operation enquiring whether they felt the issues had improved. 62 (65.2%) of those spoken to advised there had been a huge improvement with hardly any 'on street' working girls being seen in the area. Only 13 (13.7%) stated that there had been no improvement at all and a further 11 (11.6%) stated they were not affected by the issues and were unaware whether there had been any improvement.

Objective 7 – Research all data gathered for subsequent report.

A full report has been completed and provided to the Fairer Scotland Fund detailing all the results.

The financial impact of the operation is also evident. A Social Return On Investment (SROI) was undertaken to determine the worthiness of the operation. In previous years approximately 150 reports were submitted to the Procurator Fiscal relating to women prostituting themselves. Using 150 as a basis, approximate costs can be determined.

150 x 3 hours (for the police to deal with the offender and report the case) x 2 police officers at £28 per hour = £25,200.

150 x 1PF Depute x 5 hours (case reading, initial appearance and subsequent trial diets) x £23 per hour = £17,250.

Therefore, without taking into account the analysis of Court costs or Sheriffs time, the SROI is already £42,450. The operation has resulted in a reduction in crimes associated with 'on street' sex work, therefore less resources and money has been spent on investigating and reporting.

Monitoring and Evaluation

In the reporting phase of the operation, results from all aspects were gathered and assessed, including consultation and feedback from partner agencies involved. Further to this, follow up telephone surveys were conducted with all the initial residents to find out whether the number of prostitutes in the area had changed over the period of the operations. The utilisation of the combined data allowed the outcomes and delivery of objectives to be fully assessed. An end of year one report was submitted to the Fairer Scotland Fund in June 2011. This monitoring and evaluation has continued and the end of year three report is about to be compiled.

Lessons Learnt and Sustainability

One aspect of the findings from the questionnaires was the number of women who had been victims of rape but had not reported it. This raised questions in relation to how Police and their partner agencies deal with such allegations and how these procedures could be improved moving towards an even more victim-focused approach to the investigation of Serious Sexual Offences and to maximize opportunities for joint working including the potential for a Sexual Assault Referral Centre.

The project has secured another year of funding from the Fairer Scotland Fund to continue its work in 2012. The project seeks to further formalise the agreed multi agency strategy combined with a 'case managed' approach to deal with the most 'high risk' vulnerable women encountered during the project so far.

Resources

Funding: £23,296 funding provided by Fairer Scotland Fund in Years 1, 2 and 3.

Partners: Aberdeen Council, Police Scotland – Aberdeen City Division, Drugs Action, Cyrenians, Criminal Justice Social Work Department, NHS Substance Misuse, NHS Genito (GUM Clinic), Crown Officer Procurator Fiscal Service, Fairer Scotland Fund.

Outcomes

National 6 – We live longer, healthier lives.
9 – We live our lives safe from crime, disorder and danger.

Local -To provide accessible and coordinated services to deal with the consequences of sexual exploitation, specifically focussing on preventing young people and women becoming involved.
-Ensure services are targeted at high risk and vulnerable groups to ensure their safety, minimise risks such as the spread of Blood Borne Viruses and Sexually Transmitted Infections to improve community wellbeing.
-Develop information sharing amongst partner agencies to enable a 'full picture' to emerge in relation to women involved in the sex industry. Adopt a process which gives "On Street" sex workers the confidence to report any crime and for all women to be afforded the help required to assist them to exit the sex industry.

Practice Note Information

Practice Note Title: Operation Begonia
Practice Note No: 46
SCSN Topic Areas: Safety of Vulnerable Groups, Public Space Safety, Personal Safety, Offender Management.
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*Note – As of 1 April 2013 Grampian Police became part of Police Scotland. Operation Begonia is lead by officers from Aberdeen City Division