

Safer nights out van – tackling vulnerability in the night-time economy

A help point for vulnerable people, parked in the heart of Northampton's night-time economy every Friday and Saturday night.

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Key details

Stage of practice	Untested
Purpose	Prevention
Topic	Violence against women and girls Public Protection, Safeguarding & Vulnerability Public order offences
Organisation	Northamptonshire Police, Fire and Crime Commissioner
Contact	Paul Golley
Email address	paul.golley@northantspfcc.pnn.gov.uk
Region	East Midlands
Partners	Police Business and commerce Local authority Voluntary/not for profit organisation

Key details

Stage of implementation	The practice is implemented.
Start date	December 2021
Scale of initiative	Local
Target group	Adults

Aim

The main aims are:

- to support night-time economy (NTE) users with an end-to-end service
- to safeguard vulnerable people in Northampton's NTE, particularly women
- to provide an immediate place of safety with additional support services to provide options to volunteers, maximising safety, this approach provides resilience and flexibility
- to make visitors to the Northampton NTE feel safer and familiar with the synonymous pink Safer Nights Out (SNO) van – located in the same place every weekend during the same times (10pm to 5am). This approach drives the crime prevention agenda, at the same time as addressing vulnerability (a proactive and reactive approach)
- to improve the management of the NTE, bridging the gap between the door staff and the emergency services. This in turn can prevent many issues reaching them

Intended outcome

Primary outcomes are:

- to improve the feeling of safety in the NTE
- to protect vulnerable people
- to reduce the demand on emergency services by early intervention – freeing up police time used on vulnerability and spending more time policing the NTE
- improved communication between partners in the NTE, including the council, police, door staff and security, street pastors and guardians

Secondary outcome possibilities (not yet proved) include:

- a hope that violent crime may reduce due to the visible presence of guardians, and/or by intervening earlier by tackling the vulnerability
- possible reductions in ambulance calls outs, as guardians manage lower-level issues that prevent calls for ambulances or admissions to accident and emergency

Description

The van was purchased by Northamptonshire Office of Police and Crime Commissioner together with all the provisions to produce the ‘end to ends’ service. Equipment includes:

- provisions to care for vulnerable people – including sick bowls, water, foil blankets, lolly pops and many other items
- an enhanced first aid and basic medical supplies – including trauma kits and defibrillators
- engagement products – information leaflets that are applicable to the NTE and safety, such as the new Flare app
- crime prevention products and promotional items – these are supplied to vulnerable people and revellers in a timely manner, such as anti-spiking bottle tops and bottles of water
- radios – volunteers are on the channel with a CCTV monitoring station
- a large exterior video screen – to play prevention messages and draw attention to visit the van
- the ability to charge all mobile phones on the SNO van – using a range of cables and power
- lighting around the van – to stand out and draw attention to revellers
- a secondary van – to get vulnerable people home safely where all other options have been exhausted and demand will fall to the emergency services. The SNO van and minibus is maintained within the police fleet
- training for all volunteers – including officer safety, basic first aid and mental health training
- a taxi account – where demand overflows, the taxi account outlet allows guardians to get vulnerable people home safely where there is no other option

The Northampton NTE is a destination for young people travelling by public transport for cheap nights from nearby towns and cities. The relocation of the university to Northampton town centre has increased the number of young adults drinking in the leisure zone. There is a high proportion of young female students aged 18 to 24 years old. This group is statistically more vulnerable, accounting for half of all victims in the town centre.

Most establishments in the town are ‘wet trade’ – competing with regular drinks promotions that attract volume drinking.

Particularly where alcohol is involved, both offenders and victims can be considered as being on the same continuum due to a lack of control, with vulnerability entwined. There can be a fine line between arrest to custody or accident and emergency due to being too intoxicated or drug overdose. Early intervention is key to manage the situation, with flex and fluidity to react and respond accordingly.

Offender interviews and research indicate that offenders are situationally aware of the environment they choose to commit offences in. They are more likely to be deterred if there was an increased presence of capable guardians.

High levels of violence resulted in higher demand on policing. This had a knock-on effect with demand – a huge amount of policing time was going towards tackling vulnerability and the police were stretched. If we could find a solution to fill the vulnerability void and intervene at an earlier stage, then it could keep the public safer and free up force resources to police the NTE.

Our solution was an overt mobile asset known as the Safer Nights Out (SNO) van. This is funded by the Northamptonshire Police, Fire and Crime Commissioner and staffed by volunteers from Northampton Guardians.

This end-to-end approach bridges the gap from the point where identified vulnerable people vacate licensed premises and the police are called to investigate or prevent further violence. This includes getting vulnerable people home or to a place of safety where all other options have been exhausted.

This help point is deployed in the same location, at the same time every Friday and Saturday evening (10pm to 5am). This is when footfall for the NTE is at its highest. Our approach drives partnership working and identifies vulnerability early on, empowering everyone to play their part in creating positive change.

One year on, the SNO van has integrated well and feels part of the fabric of Northampton NTE – becoming synonymous with students and visitors to Northampton NTE.

Northampton guardians have clocked 5,000 free hours, improving capable guardianship and supporting more than 1,000 people. Many of these clients would or could have required the emergency services without this intervention in place, putting more demand on policing and healthcare.

The SNO van harnesses many other safety provisions and is at the heart of the vulnerability model we have developed. This approach has resulted in door staff feeling supported, with a free referral outlet to the guardians who take over the vulnerability when the client reaches a public space upon leaving licensed premises.

The guardians are supported by Northamptonshire Police, Fire and Crime Commissioner, by having the right training and crime prevention and safety equipment to provide genuine options to support vulnerable people.

Our vulnerability approach was formed by following the problem analysis triangle theory (supporting victims and the vulnerable location). It is particularly powerful alongside Operation Kayak (targeting offenders). This is a dedicated policing team that seeks out sexual predatory behaviour before it arises. By pushing on offender, location and victim, we have been able to promote a cultural change of calling out poor standards of behaviour towards women. This makes it harder for sexual predators to go undetected, while intervening early to support victims and potential victims.

Overall impact

The idea to use the voluntary sectors, backed with Office of the Police, Fire and Crime Commissioner (OPFCC) funding has been incredibly successful, drawing attention from half the police forces in the country. We deploy an overt asset in the heart of the night time economy every Friday and Saturday night, becoming synonymous with revellers. It's now part of the very fabric of the NTE and the 'help point' people go to for general support, crime prevention advice and vulnerability.

Over the past 12 months, the impact of this practice has continued to grow, with the SNO vans in Northampton and Kettering now fully embedded within local night-time economy and violence against women and girls (VAWG) prevention activity. In 2025, nearly 5,000 hours of voluntary time were contributed through SNO van shifts alone (4,918 hours), alongside 179 hours of training and a further 422 hours supporting other events, demonstrating both the scale and sustainability of the

model. This level of commitment reflects how OPFCC investment has successfully galvanised the voluntary sector. During this period, 718 individuals were supported, each with a recorded and tangible safeguarding outcome such as welfare support on the van or safe transport home. The approach remains strongly aligned to VAWG priorities, with 57% of those supported being female, while still maintaining an inclusive focus on wider vulnerability.

The Northampton Guardians' work has also gained national recognition through the King's Award for Voluntary Service, underlining the strength, quality, and impact of the initiative.

The addition of a second SNO van in Kettering has extended the reach of the model. Although operating in a smaller night-time economy, it provides a valuable visible presence, supporting Street Pastors to engage vulnerable individuals, deliver crime prevention messaging, and provide reassurance to the public.

Ongoing investment, including planned upgrades to the Northampton van, further demonstrates commitment to sustaining and enhancing the initiative.

Overall, the past 12 months show that this practice is a well-established, sustainable and scalable model that delivers tangible safeguarding outcomes, supports VAWG prevention, and reduces demand on emergency services.

Learning

The SNO van needs to be non-police branded. The organisation that runs it should ideally be a charitable organisation. This means volunteers can engage with revellers from a different angle, without suspicion and out of kindness with no motive or agenda, other than just to keep people safe.

However, we do still find it works well supporting the police. The guardians achieve a balance by working with the police but remain impartial as a charitable organisation. For example, officers will also take statements on the SNO van. Operation Kayak (a dedicated police operation to seek out sexual predatory behaviour) regularly uses the asset when dealing with crime incidents, such as drink spiking.

The model works by using kindness and early engagement with vulnerable people. This is more likely to achieve a positive outcome (less violence and crime) and less demand on the emergency services.

Where there is sign of violence, it is not for the guardians to get involved. They have a strict protocol and instruction to keep away and simply observe. However, most incidents start with a vulnerability – for example, someone detached from friends or not feeling well. Where situations escalate and violence is imminent, it is not appropriate for volunteers to engage further. They come away for police to deal with it.

Since 2025, Northamptonshire OPFCC has taken a step back from direct involvement, with the role now focused on oversight of any issues, quarterly review meetings, and the coordination of remedial works such as the installation of a new exterior wrap and general maintenance. The supporting minibus, previously used to transport vulnerable individuals home safely, has now been decommissioned. This follows Northampton Guardians successfully securing sufficient funding to operate and manage their own vehicle. As a result, Northamptonshire OPFCC now concentrates on managing and operating the core SNO vans, alongside oversight of the associated taxi account.

A key learning from this period has been the importance of perseverance and a step-by-step approach when addressing challenges. Given the inherently unpredictable and dynamic nature of the night-time economy (NTE), unforeseen circumstances are inevitable. However, the priority is to maintain a consistent and reliable service, with deployments occurring at fixed, routine times. This consistency helps the service become familiar and trusted within the local community. It is this structured and dependable approach that has firmly embedded the SNO vans into the fabric of the local NTE.

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Tags

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