

Suspect-centric investigation for online sexual offences – Operation Mumbles

Conducting a suspect-centric investigation which focused on one perpetrator who was using online social media profiles to groom, meet and sexually abuse multiple victims.

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Key details

Does it work?	Untested – new or innovative
Focus	Reoffending
Topic	Child sexual exploitation and abuse Criminal justice Cybercrime including fraud Intelligence and investigation Offender management Violence against women and girls Vulnerability and safeguarding
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Region	Eastern

Key details

Partners	Police Criminal justice (includes prisons, probation services) Local authority Voluntary/not for profit organisation
Stage of practice	Perpetrator has been found guilty and sentenced to 20 years custodial.
Start date	July 2021
Completion date	September 2022
Scale of initiative	Local
Target group	Adults Children and young people Offenders Victims

Aim

The aims of this suspect-centric approach were to:

- re-open all closed investigations
- engage with victims with the support of multi-agency partners to encourage them to provide an evidential account
- identify and safeguard other potential victims
- provide suspect management by arrest, bail conditions and enforcing conditions

Intended outcome

The intended outcomes of the suspect-centric approach were to:

- reduce the amount of Outcome 16 investigations (investigations involving the suspect that were closed due to unsupportive victims)

- charge and convict the perpetrator
- prevent further offences

Description

This initiative was formed following analytical work by Command to identify the highest high-harm rape and serious sexual offences (RASSO) perpetrators. Perpetrators who are identified can be managed by providing additional resources and funding if required.

This identified a case of an adult perpetrator of seven RASSO offences, that had all been closed due to unsupportive victims. The perpetrator identified 11–17-year-old girls through Snapchat, grooming and inciting sexual activity online and meeting some victims, committing further offences.

Essex Police opened the investigations and were initially able to obtain evidential accounts from six to seven closed investigations. This was achieved by involving an independent sexual violence advisor (ISVA) and identifying the right officer for the victim. The ISVA played a central role in providing information, guidance and counselling support, in particular around the police and criminal justice process, to provide a solid conduit between the victim and the police.

This also involved a softer approach and building rapport before the expectation of giving an evidential account and the possibility of giving evidence at court. The investigation team arrested the perpetrator during the execution of a warrant, taking a specialist digital high-tech crime team.

Essex identified further victims on the perpetrator's device through communications data. An early remand was refused by the Crown Prosecution Service (CPS). However, Essex then approached the local RASSO branch and set up an excellent line of communication. This communication included regular bi-weekly conferences, and a direct line to the lawyer, building a very good working relationship. Manageable, achievable case action plans were formulated and worked on by the police.

Bail conditions were set and checked regularly. The legal team were consulted about an interim civil order (Sexual Risk Order) to help manage the suspect and risk in the community. After building sufficient evidence with more victims, a further warrant was made, and the suspect was arrested, charged and remanded for 44 offences against 13 victims.

Overall impact

This had a huge positive community impact, with many of the victims knowing each other and the perpetrator being known on the estate. It increased public confidence in the police in the area. While the impact was mainly verbal, the investigation was heavily reported in the local and national media. This was also reported through Essex Police media streams and deemed successful public engagement due to the amount of online traffic and positive feedback on the pages.

A 'learning the lesson' initiative has been created within the force, sharing best practice around the identification of high harm offences, re-visiting investigations where victims have been unsupportive. The team has presented this investigation to chief officer group meetings as well as other continuing professional development (CPD) days within the force. The feedback from both practitioners and the chief officer group was positive.

Learning

There has been some learning around the gaps in digital forensics and the communications data knowledge base. This includes what can be retrieved from social media accounts on mobile phones, as well as the limitations of some of the local digital hubs and what can be retrieved. The suspect-centric investigation also highlighted the importance of specialist digital media investigators being present during warrants of this type, and the insight they can provide when seizing digital items.

The main challenges during the suspect-centric investigation were:

- social care resources
- ISVA resources
- other charity prevent work and resources

This was fed back to the force's 'learning the lessons' board.

The 'learning the lessons' board is made up of representatives from the professional standards department, legal, strategic change, Independent Office for Police Conduct (IOPC), human resources, learning and development, media and innovation, and vital signs. The board takes an innovative approach to making sure the force embeds ever better practices, policies and cultures.

By arranging meetings every three months, the professional standards and legal departments are able to table themes that are identified as a trend across the force. The board then looks to identify

how the force shares learning, areas for improvement, address risks, highlights good practice and decides what needs to be put in place to maximise the chance of future success. The answer could be enhancing existing training, putting some communications in place, updating a policy or addressing an issue through supervision.

An operational debrief took place between the investigative team and the senior investigating officer. It was identified that more involvement with multi-agency partners from the outset would have been beneficial, though this was difficult initially as most investigations had already been closed.

A referral to [Operation Hydrant](#) should have been made for a peer review.

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