

Operation Yale – safeguarding victims of human trafficking and sexual exploitation

A Thames Valley Police (TVP) operation that aims to identify, protect and safeguard sex workers who may be at risk of human trafficking and/or sexual exploitation.

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Key details

Does it work?	Untested – new or innovative
Focus	Prevention
Topic	Child sexual exploitation and abuse Criminal justice Intelligence and investigation Operational policing
Organisation	Thames Valley Police
HMICFRS report	PEEL 2023–25 Police effectiveness, efficiency and legitimacy: An inspection of Thames Valley Police
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Region	South East
Partners	Police

Key details

Stage of practice	The practice is implemented.
Start date	February 2022
Scale of initiative	Local
Target group	Adults Victims

Aim

The aim of Operation Yale is to identify sex workers advertising services online, who may be potential victims of human trafficking and/or sexual exploitation.

By developing and using a scoring matrix, TVP aim to identify those at greatest risk.

Intended outcome

The intended outcomes of Operation Yale are to provide:

- reassurance
- safeguarding advice
- offer the national referral mechanism (NRM)
- build trust and confidence
- identify offences and offenders linked to modern slavery

Description

It was recognised by officers that it is rare for victims of sexual exploitation and/or human trafficking to make reports to the police. TVP planned to implement a proactive way of identifying victims, with

the plan to then conduct safeguarding visits. Following a consultation process with other forces, charities, partners and academics, the force sought to proactively prioritise victims that were at the greatest risk.

A force team identify adverts on adult service websites (ASWs), either proactively or following the submission of intelligence. The team then use the sexual trafficking identification matrix (STIM), to score the advert and obtain a risk grading. This grading helps the force determine whether a safeguarding visit will be conducted, alongside other factors such as additional intelligence reports.

The address of the individual at risk is then identified, and a package of information is sent to the local policing area. A safeguarding visit, alongside the commissioned service that supports victims of crime (Victim's First) takes place within 48 hours of the package being received.

The at-risk individuals are:

- debriefed
- safeguarded
- provided with reassurance
- offered the NRM
- provided with useful local information

Suspects are then identified, arrested and a criminal investigation commenced.

A return form is provided by the attending officers which includes details of all present, including identified sex workers, punters, exploiters, landlords and tenants. A record is held to cross reference persons of interest if they are found in other locations.

Overall impact

There is no formal and structured evaluation planned. However, there are ongoing assessments of performance such as the how many adverts have been reviewed, how many have resulted in safeguarding visits, number of sex workers safeguarded and the number of arrests made.

There is no direct feedback from the sex workers who have been safeguarded, but internally the process has been streamlined. TVP aims to act more efficiently and prioritise brothels. This ensures resources are deployed to those at the greatest risk and reduce demand on the front line teams.

TVP have safeguarded over 60 sex workers, arrested several individuals, and identified five trafficking networks that are now being investigated. Operation Yale has been vital in building trust and confidence with sex workers.

Learning

- Dedicated staff are essential in conducting the research. However, this can be difficult for all forces to achieve due to financial constraints of having a separate unit.
- Ensure potential victims feel comfortable to share information with officers.
- Ensure the return form contains all the necessary information to support the investigation.

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