

Problem-solving to prevent night-time economy related serious violence at McDonalds restaurants

This project aims to prevent night-time economy related serious violence in and around McDonalds restaurants within Leicester city centre. The response involved working with the restaurant management to enhance operating procedures and modify the environment inside and outside the restaurants.

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Key details

Stage of practice	Evaluated locally
Purpose	Prevention
Topic	Violence (other) Community engagement Neighbourhood crime
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Key details

Partners	Police Business and commerce Community safety partnership Local authority Voluntary/not for profit organisation
Stage of implementation	The practice is implemented.
Start date	April 2023
Completion date	March 2024
Scale of initiative	Local
Target group	General public

Aim

The strategic aim of this project was to prevent serious violence across Leicestershire. The scanning process identified a more specific priority problem of violence in and around two McDonald's restaurants in the city centre during night-time economy (NTE) times as key priority locations for problem-solving.

Following further analysis of police-recorded crime data, CCTV footage of assaults, and insights gathered from focus groups with the NTE community, a place-based response strategy was adopted. This approach specifically targeted violence in and around identified restaurants.

The strategy set out clear objectives to:

- enhance operational procedures within restaurants
- modify the physical environment both inside and outside establishments

The aim was to reduce opportunities for provocation and strengthen capable guardianship, particularly at identified high-risk pinch points.

Intended outcome

A reduction in serious violence incidents within the hotspots where the restaurants are located during the key NTE hours of focus (10pm-7am on weekends).

Description

Leicestershire Police's prevention and problem-solving hub adopted a partnership-based approach involving McDonald's and local police. Regular meetings were held to explore root causes, identify practical solutions, and monitor progress. This collaborative strategy was preferred over an enforcement-led mode, based on the 2003 Licensing Act, as it positioned McDonald's as an equal partner. By utilising their operational insights, McDonald's staff were able to contribute solutions that police alone may not have identified. Their involvement was also critical, as many of the agreed responses required McDonald's staff for successful implementation and long-term sustainability.

Preference was given to responses that required no financial investment beyond the time commitment of the prevention and problem-solving hub and partner organisations. However, select initiatives funded through one-off Home Office GRIP grants were approved, provided they:

- offered reusable or scalable solutions
- had potential to be adopted as business-as-usual beyond the lifespan of the funding

Implementation began in April 2023, with the majority of actions rolled out within the first six months. More complex responses were introduced later, with the final implementations completed by April 2024.

Responses inside the restaurants

- Improving security at McDonald's – McDonald's employed external security staff to work overnight on weekends. CCTV footage revealed that ineffective security often led to poor customer flow management, overcrowding, and missed opportunities to de-escalate disputes, some of which escalated into serious incidents.
- Following specific incidents highlighted by the prevention and problem-solving hub, McDonald's switched from a local security provider to a national company with greater experience in high-footfall night-time economy (NTE) environments. The hub also emphasised the importance of

overnight managers proactively briefing security staff on expectations around customer flow and conflict prevention. This led to quicker identification of poor practices, with some security staff being removed following preventable incidents.

- Enhanced overnight manager responsibilities – McDonald's recognised that a proactive overnight manager, acting as a maître d', could reduce waiting times and subsequently potential conflicts. The Hub encouraged managers to wear high-visibility jackets and body-worn video cameras to enhance capable guardianship.
- Increasing visible guardianship – although CCTV coverage was strong, signage indicating its use was minimal. While legally compliant, this missed an opportunity to deter crime. McDonald's responded by displaying a clear CCTV image on large customer screens to reinforce surveillance visibility.
- Walk Away campaign integration – with Home Office Homicide Prevention funding, the prevention and problem-solving hub launched the Walk Away communications campaign, aimed at engaging young men in the NTE to protect themselves and their peers from violence. McDonald's integrated campaign materials into its environment, including branded barrier covers, QR code stickers on food bags, and posters near entrances.
- Calming the restaurant environment – playing classical music overnight was identified as a strategy used in other McDonalds restaurants nationally. To implement, the manager only needed to email head office specifying the desired times to play the music. Staff feedback indicated that customers noticed the music, often with surprise as they entered the restaurant. The music helped to calm the environment, subtly reducing provocations and overall noise levels, making it easier for intoxicated customers to hear their orders being called.

Responses outside the restaurants

- Increased police foot patrols – using Home Office GRIP funding, additional GPS-tracked police patrols were deployed to hotspots, including outside the Market Street McDonald's. From July to December 2023, over five hours of extra foot patrols per shift were provided. Officers made direct contact with night shift managers, boosting staff confidence and reinforcing police support. Though not sustainable long-term, this visible presence helped McDonald's feel supported during the strategy rollout. It also influenced broader policing strategy, with GPS-tracked foot patrols becoming standard across Leicester's NTE from January 2024.
- Visible partner presence – the hub collaborated with St John's Ambulance (a volunteer-led charity providing first aid) and Leicester Street Pastors, sharing hotspot data and patrol routes to focus

their efforts. This added 2.5 hours of partner presence per shift at Market Street and East Gates locations. In April 2024, a 'safe space' was created outside the Market Street McDonald's. The additional government funding was used to purchase a gazebo, chairs, phone charging stations, refreshments, and blankets. St John's Ambulance and Street Pastor agencies now use this area as a base to support vulnerable individuals, while also enhancing guardianship outside the restaurant.

- Improved street lighting – discussions with the local authority revealed that street lighting defaulted to 50% intensity after 10pm. Based on evidence from the College of Policing [Crime Reduction Toolkit](#), it was agreed to use a proportion of the additional government funding to increase lighting intensity to 100% on weekend nights in key areas, including outside both city centre restaurants.

The Walk Away campaign was deployed across popular nearby nightclubs, bars, and public locations. The campaign included:

- an advertising van parked in hotspot areas
- queue barriers
- handstamps
- t-shirts and hoodies for bar staff
- high-visibility vests for security staff
- a mural painted on a vacant shop front in a pedestrianised area between the two restaurants

Evaluation

Leicestershire Police have conducted an [evaluation](#). A prevention and problem-solving hub crime analyst assessed the project's impact on serious violence in two restaurant hotspots during key NTE hours (10pm–7am, weekends).

- pre-implementation year: April 2022–March 2023
- implementation year: April 2023–March 2024
- post-implementation year: April 2024–March 2025

Four high-risk Leicester city centre hotspots which were not targeted by the project served as control areas.

Evaluation results

In the two McDonald's intervention hotspots, serious violence fell by 57 offences (50%) between the pre-implementation and implementation years. When compared to control areas, a 32.5% reduction in violence was recorded.

An odds ratio technique was utilised to calculate a more accurate measure of the impact of the programme and the weighted displacement difference test was used to determine if the changes in crime were statistically significant. These results indicated there had been a 38% reduction in violence in the intervention areas when compared to the control areas and this reduction was statistically significant.

In the post-implementation year, offences in the intervention areas rose from 58 to 78, but remained 37% lower than the pre-implementation year. An odds ratio calculation indicated that a 16% reduction had been experienced in the intervention areas in comparison to the control areas. However, this was not statistically significant.

The reductions in violence in the treatment areas was equivalent to a cost of crime avoidance of approximately £1,390,950 over the 2 years of the problem-solving activity (based on UK Home Office estimates of the Economic and Social Cost of Crime).

Using the Cambridge Crime Harm Index (CCHI), similar trends were observed. Based on odds ratio results, the intervention areas experienced a 39% decrease in harm scores when compared to control areas between the pre-implementation and implementation years, and a further 25% decrease between pre-implementation and post-implementation years.

The findings suggest the interventions helped reduce serious violence and crime harm during the implementation year. In the post-implementation year, some reductions, particularly in more harmful violence, were sustained.

Interpreting results is complicated by the proximity of the intervention and control hotspots, all within Leicester city centre, raising the possibility of cross-area influence. Suitable control areas outside the city centre were unavailable due to differing crime profiles. Additionally, other policing initiatives (such as efforts to implement hot spots police patrols as business as usual across the city's NTE operation) may have affected both treatment and control areas.

To assess displacement, a 50-metre buffer was added around each hotspot. Evaluation results showed no evidence of displacement; instead, a potential diffusion of benefits was observed, with serious violence dropping 30.6% from pre-implementation to implementation year and 20.2% by the post-implementation year. A weighted displacement difference test that included treatment, control and buffer areas around each hotspot also showed that decreases in violence were statistically significant in the treatment areas between pre-implementation and implementation years.

Qualitative evaluation

Qualitative focus groups were conducted post-implementation with McDonald's staff. Findings from the focus groups indicated improved perceptions of safety and from January 2021 to December 2023, staff turnover had dropped by 60%, however other factors may have contributed.

Methods including ongoing patch walks and licensing visits, reviewing new crime incidents including CCTV footage and conducting repeat focus groups with McDonald's staff were used to track the implementation of the project. These tracking methods increased the likelihood of successful implementation of agreed responses but also highlighted areas needing further development or adjustment. For instance, patch walks revealed that there were periods when no classical music was being played. When this was reported to managers, it was noted that while staff could not control the music selection (managed externally) they could turn off the music. This was rectified by managers but underscored the need for continued tracking to ensure responses were being implemented as intended.

Footfall within Leicester's NTE

An alternative explanation for the reduction in crime was reduced NTE footfall due to the increases in the cost of living experienced over the time period of this problem-solving work. However, McDonald's data showed a 2.3% increase in night-time footfall in November 2024 in comparison to November 2023. More robust Business Improvement District (BID) footfall data from April 2023–January 2024 also showed an overall increase during peak NTE hours, including a 17.1% rise near the East Gates McDonald's. This suggests reduced footfall had not been experienced during this time and instead, reductions in violence had been experienced during a time when Leicester had become busier.

Overall impact

The findings suggest the interventions helped reduce serious violence and crime harm during the implementation year. In the post-implementation year, some reductions, particularly in more harmful violence, were sustained.

Learning

Implementation Tracking

Tracking the implementation of responses was vital to the project's success. The prevention and problem-solving hub used multiple methods to monitor progress and ensure responses were applied consistently, including:

- ongoing patch walks
- licensing visits
- review of new crime incidents, including CCTV footage
- repeat focus groups with McDonald's staff

These approaches increased the likelihood of successful implementation and highlighted areas requiring adjustment. For example, patch walks revealed periods when classical music was not being played, despite being a key intervention. Staff couldn't control the music selection (which was externally managed), but they could turn off the music. Once managers were notified, the issue was resolved, illustrating the importance of continuous monitoring.

Partnership Approach

A partnership approach was adopted which was preferred over an enforcement approach (utilising the 2003 Licensing Act) as it made McDonalds an equal partner in the process, utilising their operational knowledge to identify solutions that the police might not have foreseen. Also, since most solutions had to be implemented by McDonalds staff, their support and involvement was crucial for proper instigation, implementation, and maintenance.

Alternative responses

Other interventions were considered but not implemented for various reasons including:

- Increasing security staff numbers working overnight on weekends from 2 to 3. While this could have enhanced guardianship, the franchisee deemed this too expensive.
- Outside both restaurants are high-quality, live-monitored, local authority-run cameras. Despite this, the CCTV cameras and signs advertising their use were discreet. Proposals to use street art or pavement signage to increase awareness of the cameras were not supported by the local authority.
- A proposed idea to use air conditioning to 'calm the environment' was not feasible, due to welfare concerns of the staff.

How might the responses have been more effective?

- During implementation, the prevention and problem-solving hub periodically reviewed recent relevant incidents before having quarterly meetings with staff. Weekly or monthly reviews would have been more beneficial, allowing quicker recognition and resolution of new issues and/or implementation problems.
- The prevention and problem-solving hub would also have liked to obtain more customer feedback on the problem and changes made via links to online surveys handed out to customers. The time to develop this and ensure a good response rate were barriers which prevented this in this project.

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