

Operation Pele – identifying and disrupting football ticket touting

A partnership approach between Merseyside Police and a Premier League football club to identify ticket touts, disrupt illegal ticket sales and recover criminal assets linked to the exploitation of football fans.

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Key details

Stage of practice	Untested
Purpose	Prevention
Topic	Financial and economic crime Fraud Money laundering
Organisation	Merseyside Police
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Region	North West
Partners	Police Business and commerce
Stage of implementation	The practice is implemented.
Start date	February 2025

Key details

Scale of initiative	Local
Target group	Adults Communities Families General public Offenders

Aim

The aim of Operation Pele is to work with a Premier League football club to identify ticket touts and prevent their illegal activities.

Intended outcome

The intended outcomes of Operation Pele are to:

- improve the identification of ticket touts
- increase the public's awareness of the scale and impact of ticket touting
- increase information sharing between Merseyside Police and the Premier League football club in preparation for the 2028 UEFA European Football Championship
- improve the force's and the Premier League football club's knowledge and capabilities for deterring and investigating ticket touting
- improve the recovery of criminal assets through the use of the Proceeds of Crime Act 2002 (POCA)

Description

Following information shared by a high street bank with Merseyside Police, an investigation was launched into an individual selling football tickets at inflated prices, contrary to the Criminal Justice and Public Order Act 1994. During the investigation, it became apparent that ticket touting was increasingly being used as a method of financially exploiting football fans. Further analysis

identified several individuals who had purchased multiple club memberships.

The initial analysis revealed that some individuals had used various methods to acquire large numbers of club memberships. To purchase a matchday ticket, individuals are required to hold a club membership. Each applicant is assigned a unique reference number linked to their name. There is no limit on the number of memberships that can be purchased, and matchday tickets are allocated through a ballot system for each fixture. As a result, holding multiple memberships increases the likelihood of being allocated matchday tickets.

Planning process

In response, Merseyside Police approached the Premier League football club's police liaison officers, who subsequently engaged the club's banning and sanctions team. The legal services departments of Merseyside Police and the Premier League football club developed a memorandum of understanding to facilitate information sharing and disclosure processes. The agreement was signed by representatives from both organisations. Its purpose was to utilise Part 5 of the Proceeds of Crime Act 2002 (POCA) to develop intelligence, gather evidence and identify illicit profits generated through the unlawful resale of football tickets at significantly inflated prices. POCA enables the efficient recovery of criminal assets and allows the team to maximise the use of its limited resources by targeting a greater number of offenders. The football club can also impose its own sanctions, including membership suspensions and banning orders.

Operation Pele was developed by a detective sergeant and three financial investigators from Merseyside Police, working alongside two analysts from the football club. Communication takes place on an ad hoc, needs-based basis, primarily via email. Information sharing focuses on the data held by the club relating to individuals under investigation, including telephone numbers, email addresses, residential addresses and bank account details.

Operation Pele identified that individuals were using a variety of methods to create multiple membership accounts. These ranged from minor variations in the spelling of names to the use of automated "bot" technology to create false identities. Links between accounts were identified through shared bank account details, telephone numbers and residential addresses.

Implementation

Operation Pele was implemented at the start of the 2025-26 Premier League season. Once ticket tout accounts had been identified, financial investigators were able to commence enquiries aimed at recovering criminal assets.

The Operation Pele team has also briefed uniformed police officers and football stewards on matchdays to raise awareness and encourage a proactive approach to identifying further ticket touting activity. These briefings have increased operational awareness of ticket touting and related criminal activity around the stadium.

Ticket touts may be identified through:

- information provided by high street banks highlighting suspicious or unusual banking activity
- individuals holding large numbers of club memberships and purchasing significant volumes of tickets
- matchday intelligence identifying individuals using "burner" phones to provide e-tickets to people entering the stadium

Once a ticket tout has been identified, Merseyside Police launches a money laundering investigation. The force can then apply for a court order to obtain an Account Freezing Order (AFO), enabling investigators to trace and freeze suspected criminal assets.

Operation Pele is proactively deployed on matchdays, with officers observing and identifying ticket touts engaged in unlawful ticket sales. Positive action is then taken against those identified, either directly by the force or through information and support provided by the football club.

The United Kingdom Football Policing Unit (UKFPU) has been briefed on Operation Pele. The UKFPU subsequently convened a meeting with representatives from football clubs and police forces across England and Wales to raise awareness of the findings and share operational learning and good practice.

Funding and senior management approval

No additional funding has been required to implement Operation Pele. To date, Merseyside Police has detained more than £1 million under the Part 5 civil recovery powers of POCA. Financial investigators involved in the operation now also deploy at home matches to support football stewards and uniformed officers in gathering intelligence and evidence.

No senior management approval was required for the planning or implementation of Operation Pele.

Overall impact

Since the implementation of Operation Pele, the Premier League football club have issued 432 lifetime bans and 115 indefinite suspensions.

The briefing included an overview of POCA opportunities within their police forces and strip criminals of their assets. Operation Pele has provided an opportunity to tackle organised criminals, with a more collaborative working approach.

Learning

Operation Pele has established a positive working relationship between the force and the Premier League football club. The use of civil recovery powers under the Proceeds of Crime Act 2002 (POCA) has enabled a small team to recover illicit assets from those responsible while keeping pace with incoming cases. Merseyside Police is currently working with partner agencies to identify further opportunities to deprive offenders of the proceeds of their criminal activity.

Securing commitment and cooperation from both the force and the Premier League football club has been essential to the success of the operation. While Operation Pele was implemented quickly and at relatively low cost, the partnership approach has been instrumental in identifying and investigating ticket touts.

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