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Tackling Child Sexual Exploitation

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The Problem: “Child Sexual Exploitation (CSE) has become an increasing problem in my force area and an issue I have focused on during my time on the programme. A small group of girls aged 14-17 were repeatedly coming to my attention in the local town centre, so I linked in with a member of Child Exploitation and Missing Persons Unit (CEMU) to discuss the issue. The girls were known to the CEMU for being repeatedly victimised in CSE incidents. Whilst CEMU suspected that CSE offences were taking place in hotels, they had not been able to identify specific locations which presented a significant gap in the intelligence picture.”

My Approach: “Having identified this, I spoke to my Inspector and asked if I could put together an innovative operation to not only identify hotels susceptible to CSE, but as a follow up, provide training tailored to each hotel in order to reduce this risk. So was born Operation Bluefin. The operation involved two female officers and two 15-year-old female police cadets in plain clothes entering the hotel with a booking made under a male name for a double room, even though there were four of them. They would then attempt to buy alcohol from the hotel bar; first just the cadets and, if unsuccessful, then with the officers too, but making it clear the alcohol was for the underage girls. Once they had access to the hotel room, three male officers one by one came and met the girls in a variety of circumstances; one at reception, one used the back door linked to a fire alarm and the final one came to reception and requested a key for the room. The scenario was made as suspicious as possible. For example, a female officer introduced a cadet to the male in front of hotel staff with lines such as *“what do you think?”*. At the end of the night, when the four females checked out - having only been in the room a few hours in the evening - a uniformed officer then entered and asked if anything suspicious had happened that night. Concerningly, for the first two executions of this operation, the hotel staff did not challenge the situation, nor did they report any suspicious behaviour.”

The Impact: “This operation implemented a multi-agency approach and included licencing from the council, a local women’s support charity and child services, to name a few. The results of this operation allowed us to tailor feedback and provide training for hotel staff to raise awareness and reduce the risk of CSE going forward. Efforts were also made to adapt the training for all, given the demographic range of hotel employees. As such, the hotel management were contacted to ensure that translations of the training could be made available, if needed.

Operation Bluefin turned out to be such a success, that as its creator, I have been asked to run it in other boroughs. It is now a force-wide standard for “CSE test purchasing” (when hotels are targeted to see whether an adult and a person apparently under the age of 18 or 16 are able to access a room and/or try to purchase alcohol) and at least two other forces in the UK have started to use it. It has also led to strengthened engagement between Neighbourhoods and Specialist Teams on investigations of this type, allowing for greater safeguarding of those at most risk of victimisation. Further to this, and very encouragingly, there has also been an increased amount of suspicious behaviour reported by local hotels, as well as improved overall engagement with the police.”



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