

# Sexual Offences along the Basingstoke Canal

## Summary

### Scanning:

The Basingstoke Canal is over 38 miles in length. It runs between different counties and is used by thousands of people every year. 10 miles of the Canal runs directly through Woking. Between July 2019 and December 2020 there were 27 sexual exposures reported to police along Woking's 10 mile stretch of the canal very close to the canal.

### Analysis:

The offences were broken down and then looked at collectively. By mapping the offences, we could see that there were three common areas where the offences were happening and that a lot of the offences were grouped together in small clusters.

We visited these areas and look at common themes of the area. This identified that the areas were secluded and overgrown. The visit also emphasized the lack of guardianship along the canal.

Clear offence patterns showed that the offences predominantly occurred on weekdays, either early in the morning or late in the afternoon.

It was identified that some of the earliest reports lacked detail and clarity to identify the offender/s. For example in some incidents the descriptions of the offender were very vague. Of the reports that did have the required detail we were able to utilise e-fit technology to look at common features of the suspect. This enabled us to establish that rather than one potential suspect it was more likely we had multiple offenders.

One issue highlighted was the police response to sexual exposures varied considerably. On some occasions multiple police would be deployed, whilst in other incidents the reports were not deployed to and limited details were taken over the phone.

We also began to look at our victims and look at common themes such as their age.

## Response:

- Investigation strategy for all offences.
- The creation of Canal Watch to ensure ongoing patrols by members of the public.
- Work with partner agencies to clear the area, add CCTV, clear graffiti and add signage
- Use of media to highlight the issue and the importance of reporting to police
- Police patrols at key times in specific locations.
- Targeted media and communications aimed at the people who use the canal.

## Assessment:

- A reduction in offences of 80%
- Over 400 hours of patrols completed members of the public in the first 4 months of the Canal Watch initiative.
- Better service for victims of crime
- Number of suspects arrested.
- One suspect charged

## Application

# Scanning

The Basingstoke Canal runs from Hampshire into Surrey and covers a 38-mile area. 10 miles of the Canal run directly through Woking. The canal is used by thousands of people every year and is uniquely positioned to run through the heart of Woking town centre meaning it is a well-known and well utilised landmark. The Basingstoke Canal Society completed a survey that highlighted that during the coronavirus restrictions in April 2021 the people using the canal daily increased by 300%.

It was identified that between July 2019 and December 2020 there were 27 incidents of sexual exposure reported to police along Woking's 10-mile stretch of the canal. The offences had been looked at in isolation.

In these incidents, offenders were exposing themselves to female members of the public. Often these females would be alone. Sexual offences of this nature can have a huge impact on the victim. One victim spoken to highlighted that, after being a victim they were afraid to leave their home.

Police identified this pattern in early 2020 and began work to try a look at the offences in more detail and look at a problem-solving approach using the OSARA model.

There were concerns that the offences were not being considered as seriously as they should be. The risk was that we had several offences with one or more offenders, and the level of service to the victim changed depending on who took the investigation. In some cases, no action investigations were being conducted by police,

There were concerns that the level of service to victims could result in a loss of public confidence in the police and increase public fear. Police were concerned that the offences could escalate to violent sexual offences.

To look at the details in more depth we reviewed calls made to Surrey Police, the associated crime report and spoke to other departments internally including the Violent and Sexual Offender Register Team. After the initial scan with Surrey we used data from neighbouring forces including Hampshire to see if they had similar level of offences being reported. We liaised with the National Crime Agency to understand support they could offer or similar trends in other counties.

To understand the views of as many people as possible and increase awareness of the issue we held online question and answer sessions and in person meet and greet stands along the canal.

As the work progressed, we used postcode mapping to identify 2100 homes adjacent to the canal. Each home was sent a letter seeking their views on why they use the canal, how safe they feel and what improvements they believed were necessary.

We identified several partner agencies that had an interest in reducing the levels of criminality along The Basingstoke Canal. They included:

- Woking Borough Council
- Surrey County Council
- The Basingstoke Canal Authority
- Neighbourhood Watch
- The Basingstoke Canal Society.

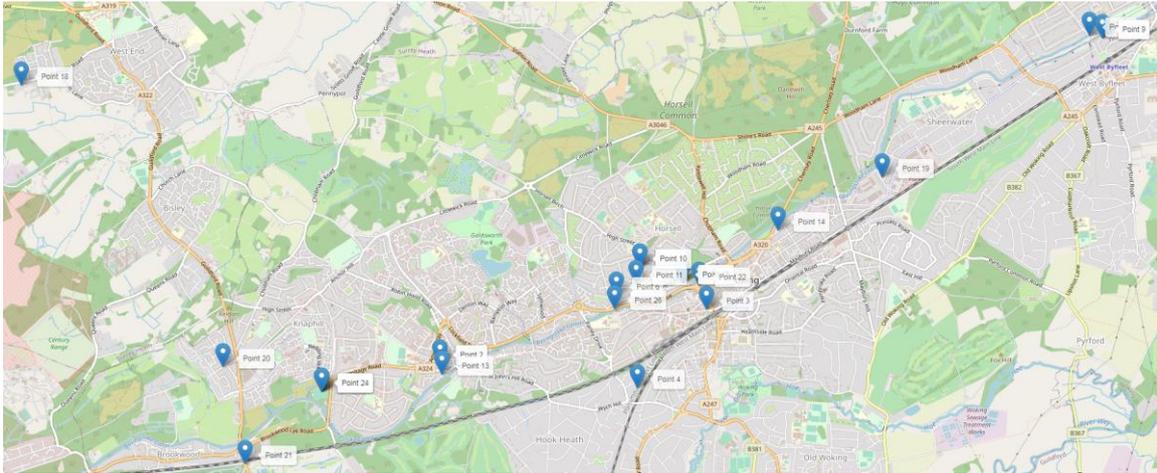
To enable better working relationships we held an online meeting between all these agencies to discuss ideas of why they felt the problem existed and how to resolve it.

To measure the problem a baseline was taken of the number of reports to Surrey Police over a two-year period involving either sexual offences along the canal. One concern highlighted was that not everyone considered 'flashing' a crime. This meant the problem could be underreported, meaning our baseline of reported issues could be much lower than the actual number of offences. The offences were measured over several months to see if the levels increased, decreased, or remained the same.

# Analysis

To break the problem down we used a variety of techniques.

The offences were mapped out to show where they had occurred. This identified three distinctive areas along the canal where the offences were occurring.



The offences were broken down into the days and times that they had occurred to establish a pattern. It was established that they occurred on weekdays either in the morning between 06:00-09:00 or in the afternoons between 15:30-18:30.

06:15 – 08:15: 11 incidents (37.9% of total)

15:30 – 18:30: 16 incidents (53.33% of total)

We discussed the implications of these timings and how it could help identify suspects. We considered several hypothesis' including:

- The timings relate to a person using the canal to travel to and from their place of work.
- The times relate to when less members of the public were using the canal therefore reducing the chances of getting caught.
- Less guardians along the canal at these times.

Each report was reviewed to look at common themes or patterns. This review enabled us to see the actions taken by police and look at issues within the initial police response, missed investigative opportunities and consider if all reasonable lines of enquiry had been followed.

An analyst was used to break the offences down further; the analyst was able to cross reference offences based on their location, description of the offender and description of the victim. The

analyst then created an analytical product of their work that was utilised to formulate police and partner agencies' response plans.

The canal itself was the common factor in all the offences. The canal had numerous entrances and exits. Parts of the canal were overgrown with several hiding places. The areas were often secluded meaning the chances of a suspect being caught were remote. The canal was covered in graffiti which seemed to indicate that crime was allowed along the area. This fitted into the 'broken window theory' of crime.

A major issue identified early, was that most victims were not calling police at the time. They were often waiting until they arrived home or reporting it hours later. The impact of this meant police lost vital golden hour opportunities thereby reducing the effectiveness of our investigations.

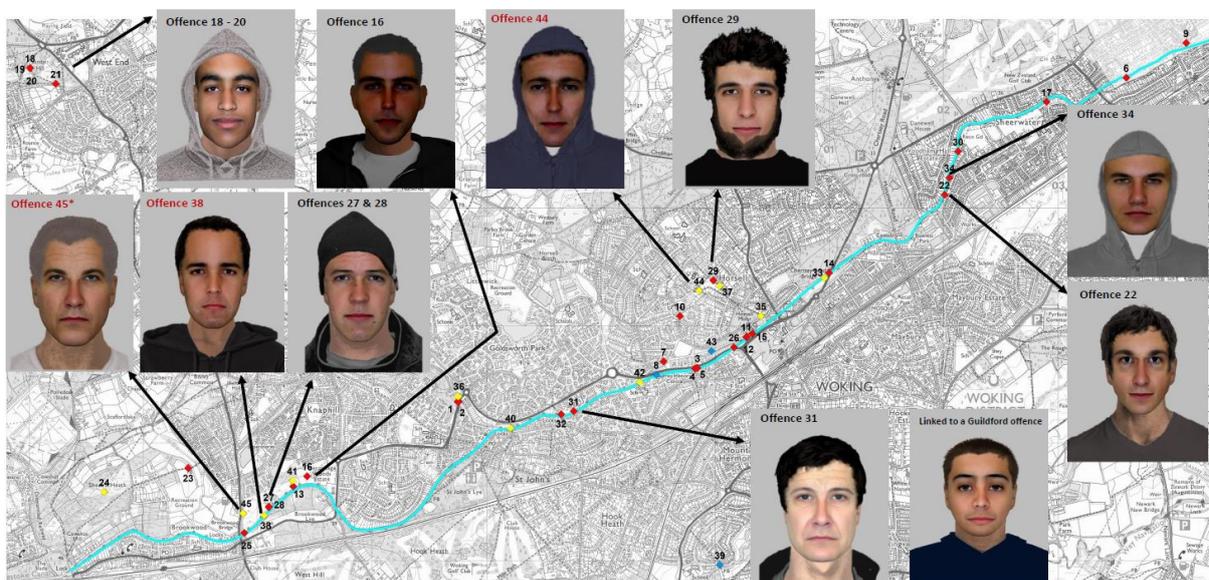
In most areas where huge numbers of people go you need guardianship to ensure it is safe. For example, if you go into a supermarket you would expect to see store security, if you went to a football match you would expect to see match stewards. However, it was highlighted that although thousands of people used the canal each year, there was no guardianship at most times. This issue was discussed with the Basingstoke Canal Authority. They explained they only had a small number of staff who covered a large area reducing their visibility to the public.

The lack of guardianship was a key element in my view. By only having limited guardianship it meant offenders could believe that the benefit of committing the offence outweighed the risk of being caught. This in turn would create a higher fear of crime for potential victims.

Using the Problem Analysis Triangle, we broke the problem down further. It highlighted the following information:

Offender- The reward for the offender came with extremely low risk. Due to the large area, lack of any CCTV and secluded nature the chances of getting caught was low. This meant that an offender's cost benefit analysis was heavily weighted in favour of the benefits.

From the analyst's report, it appeared that we had several different offenders committing offences. This evidence suggested that there was something about the location that was drawing in multiple offenders. Therefore, more work was done focusing on the place and the target to reduce the reward for the offender.



Place- The scanning and analysis highlighted that the canal itself was the main factor in these continuing offences. We worked with Designing Out Crime Officers (DOCOs) to complete a walkthrough of the canal. This was done in conjunction with the Basingstoke Canal Authority so areas of concern could be highlighted. From the report, it was noted that there was no CCTV on the canal and due to Covid-19 restrictions, parts of the canal had become overgrown. A huge amount of graffiti along the stretch of the canal was highlighted which made the area seem a place where crime could occur. During the walk it was noted that no police or persons of authority from partner agencies were seen at all. This added to the belief that there were too few guardians along the canal making any offending less risky to the offender.



Target/Victim- From the analyst’s report and from the review of the crime reports, it was clear that the offenders were targeting females. The victim ages varied with a small number of cases against children on their way to school. The majority were against adult females aged between 20-40. By being aware of this I was able to tailor a response targeting future potential victims and gain and insight into the person committing the offences.

| Age Range | Count of offences |
|-----------|-------------------|
| Under 18  | 11                |
| 19-25 yrs | 7                 |
| 26-30 yrs | 5                 |
| 30-40 yrs | 5                 |
| 41 + yrs  | 1                 |
| Total     | 30                |

\*table shows the ‘count of offences’ at the time they were taken.

The data used during the analysis came from an analytical product created by analysts utilising crime reports. Based on this I was happy with validity of the data. However, we felt that the subject matter was under reported and often not treated as a serious crime. This led to crime reports containing minimal details which meant the data that could be extracted was sparse.

During the analysis several key reasons were established that indicated why the problem was continuing. This included:

- Lack of guardianship

- Lack of CCTV
- Opportunities offered by the environment such as hiding places, overgrown areas
- Lack of understanding around the impact of the crime on a victim which meant police were not responding effectively
- Reduced golden hour opportunities where crimes were reported hours or days after they had happened.

## Response

The responses to the problem were put in in a staged format over several weeks and months. The responses evolved as extra funding became available.

### Initial Response

One of the first aspects that was addressed was to try and improve the policing response to incidents and the subsequent investigation.

To achieve this, I recognised that often members of the public called up several hours after an incident occurred which dramatically reduced the golden hour opportunities which subsequently had a negative result on investigations. To overcome this a series of actions were undertaken to encourage members of the public to report crimes as soon as possible including:

- A Facebook live event for Woking. This Facebook live event had over 13,000 views,
- The use of targeted social media allowed us to reach a huge number of Woking residents. By paying a small fee we increased the reach of these posts and ensured they remained in timelines for a longer period. Using social media allowed us to create witness appeals, offer crime prevention advice and allowed us to raise awareness that we were actively patrolling the area with the aim of reducing the fear of crime.



- Meet and greet events along the canal where officers could speak directly to the community that use the canal.
- Engagement stands at Gyms near the canal. This was an opportunity based on a hypothesis that the suspects had targeted people using the canal to exercise.
- A letter sent out from police and partners to residents that were within a specific postcode around the canal area. The cost of this was paid for by Woking Borough Council.
- Using social media of partner agencies- The police followers on social media would not always be the community that we are targeting. To try and reach the relevant community and users of the canal partner agencies agreed to share our messaging. This included the Basingstoke Canal Authority and Woking Park Run (a large section of the Woking Park Run uses the canal) which enabled us to reach over 15,000 people who had an interest in the canal.
- Working with schools- The police were aware that a few victims had been children walking to and from school. To reduce the fear of crime we worked with the schools to create an information bulletin. This enabled us to give out key messages about how to keep safe and the importance of calling police early if an offence occurred. The message was passed to parents of children in secondary schools. This route was deemed appropriate as it would enable the child to be passed the message in a manner deemed appropriate by the parent or guardian.

**Investigations-** It was highlighted very early that the quality of investigations and service provided to victims varied immensely. To overcome this a minimum standard of investigation was written and shared with all officers. These standards were written in conjunction with a detective sergeant and were designed to maximise the opportunities to identify and prosecute the offender. The minimum standards included:

- Taking the exact location of the offence using What Three Words App. This app enables a person to pinpoint a location to within three metres. Ensuring the location is accurate meant we could look at the exact location where offences had happened and look at possible reasons why the offence was possible in that location.
- The use of a forensic strategy ensured initial responders to incidents were empowered to be more effective with an initial investigation. The strategy included what to do in certain scenarios.
- Mapping the route the victim had taken so that CCTV opportunities could be considered.
- E-fit of offender- This was important as it would enable police to cross reference offences and consider if the offender was linked to previous offences.

To ensure this was complied with, the neighbourhood sergeant had oversight of all investigations.

**CRIMESTOPPERS-** We were aware that the suspects would be known to someone. Maybe their behaviour had changed recently, or they had bragged about the offences to friends. We are mindful that some members of the public do not want to report crimes to police. This could be down to a lack of trust or previous negative experience. To overcome this we approached CRIMESTOPPERS who agreed to support us by offering a £5000 reward. This was a significant amount and could provide a crucial piece of the jigsaw in identifying offenders.

**REWARD**  
for key information on a spate of  
**indecent sexual exposure incidents**  
in Woking, Surrey

Tell the independent charity Crimestoppers what you know on the phone or online and stay 100% anonymous. Always.

**crimestoppers-uk.org**



**CrimeStoppers.**  
**0800 555111**  
100% anonymous. Always.

**Initial response to incidents-** From the scanning and analysis the initial response to incidents was highlighted as an area where we could do more. On some occasions the reports were never deployed to whilst on other occasions there was a limited response. To try and improve this, an initial response plan was created. This plan included the response needed by the contact centre so that the relevant details were obtained from the person calling police. The plan included a map of the canal which included every entrance and exit. This enabled the control room to deploy officers to specific areas along the canal rather than just an ad hoc area search.



**Prevention of crime** was a key part to the problem solving for the canal series. Several responses were implemented to prevent further incidents. This included:

- Introduction of CCTV along the canal- The issues along the canal were adopted at the Joint Action Group (JAG). The Joint Action Group is a meeting between partner agencies to discuss ongoing issues

and look at how agencies can work together to solve problems in that area. Due to the concerns it was agreed through JAG that a temporary CCTV camera would be moved to the canal at a junction which had several exits on and off to maximise the amount of people in captured. This had the benefit of increasing our opportunities of detecting crime and deterring offenders.

- Routine patrols in areas highlighted from mapping was completed at key times. The patrols were completed by response officers as well as dog units who begun to use the area to exercise their dogs. These patrols were shared with the community via social media.

### **Canal Watch**

As part of the preventative measures, regular patrols by officers were encouraged. It was hoped that this would provide reassurance to canal users, increase the perceived risk for offenders, and increase the likelihood of offence detection. Unfortunately, due to the nature of policing, it was accepted that often there would be limited opportunities for officers to routinely patrol the area. This meant that there was a need for other guardians along the canal, to create a more sustainable response.

Research highlighted an initiative in West Midlands where a Neighbourhood Watch group was created for their canal systems. This idea was adapted, and we created a Canal Watch.

Canal Watch was made up of several volunteers who agreed to patrol the canal at key times identified from the scanning and analysis in high visibility jackets. The volunteers were recruited using social media. 30 volunteers signed up to support the efforts and be part of Canal Watch. All the volunteers were invited to a virtual meeting with Police, Woking Borough Council, the Basingstoke Canal Authority and Society. In this meeting it was highlighted what the idea of Canal Watch was, and to get information about what support volunteers would require from us and partner agencies.

The role of a Canal Watch volunteer was to report any anti-social behaviour or other crime to police and highlight graffiti, fly tipping or damaged property to the relevant agency. Each volunteer was given a point of contact from the council and the Basingstoke Canal Authority to who they could report their findings. The members were encouraged to report any policing matters through 101 or 999.

An example would be where a volunteer finds drug needles near the canal. They would have the contact details to report this for the Neighbourhood Team manager at Woking Borough Council. Once notified the Neighbourhood manager would aim to have the needles removed within a specified time.

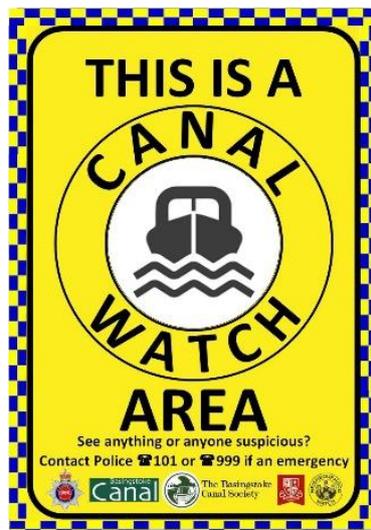
When partner agencies received any reports, they were expected to take action to rectify the issue.

All volunteers were given a safety briefing by police. Each member who completed a patrol would report their patrol to The Basingstoke Canal Authority. This would include information about what they had observed, any issues they highlighted and how long and where they had patrolled. Their patrols were logged and then forwarded to police each month. Over a four-month period over 400 hours of patrols were completed by Canal Watch members.



All Canal Watch volunteers agreed to be part of a WhatsApp group where they could arrange to meet for patrols and so police could pass key messages to the Canal Watch volunteers quickly and easily.

Alongside the introduction of Canal Watch, signage was put up along the canal. The idea of using signs was taken from a separate initiative we ran to reduce bicycle thefts in the area. The idea was to show persons that the police, partner agencies and the public were guardians of the area, that they were working collectively as a partnership and that it was a safe environment.



The Canal Watch officially started in April 2021. At the launch event local newspapers attended to report on the Canal Watch and try and recruit further members. The Canal Watch initiative was also advertised through an interview with the Borough Commander on BBC radio.

PATROLS by community volunteers to combat tackle anti-social behaviour along the Basingstoke canal towpath in Woking started this week.

Canal Watch was launched on Monday by Surrey Police in collaboration with Woking Borough Council, Neighbourhood Watch, Basingstoke Canal Authority and the Basingstoke Canal Society.



Canal Watch members were invited to a partnership meeting every three months to discuss their progress, concerns and wishes with partner agencies. The meeting was also an opportunity to thank the members for their work.

The funding for Canal Watch cost less than £1000 and was funded by the Police and Crime Commissioner. The funding will allow Canal Watch to continue for several years.

### **Safer Streets Fund**

Police and partner agencies discussed ideas around the canal. Although a temporary CCTV camera had been put on the canal it only covered one area of a very long canal. Police and partner agencies therefore began discussions of how to expand the CCTV coverage.

Police had also identified through walks with the DOCOs that there was a huge amount of graffiti along the canal. The cost of removing this was considerable as the graffiti had to be removed in such a way that it did not harm the environment or enter the water and affect wildlife.

A bid was submitted by the Police and Crime Commissioner to the Safer Streets Fund to try and rectify this. The bid was for successful and we were awarded £175,000. The money will be used to clean the entire length of the canal from canal and paint the worst effected places with anti-graffiti paint (this work is still ongoing and is due to finish in June 2022).



The money has also been used to secure six CCTV cameras that are being placed along the canal. Through the JAG process it was agreed these cameras will be controlled and monitored by Woking Borough Council as part of the other town centre CCTV. The cameras chosen were designed to be overt and include a flashing blue light. This ensured the CCTV had a multi-functional approach by:

- Deterring offenders from committing offences
- Increase investigative lines of enquiry if a crime occurred
- Reducing the fear of crime

Funding was agreed for electric mountain bikes which will be shared between the police and Canal Watch volunteers to conduct patrols along the canal, as it was identified that this was a much more efficient method to patrol the canal and would increase the visibility of guardians thereby deterring criminality and reducing the fear of crime.

## Assessment

The work around the canal was started because of several sexual offences against females using the canal. These assaults occurred over a two-year period and there did not appear to be any prolonged break in offences. Prior to starting the problem-solving work with partner agencies, the longest period without an offence was two months. This indicated that the offences would not simply stop.

After the implementation of Canal Watch and CCTV in April 2021, the offence rate dropped dramatically.

Between January 2019 and April 2021 there were 34 offences in total. On average this worked out to be an average of 2.15 offences over that 16 month period.

Between May 2021 and November 2022 there have been a further 10 offences which amounts to 0.5 offences per month.

Based on this is a drop in offending by 80 %.

The Safer Streets Work was fully completed in June 2022. A survey is now being completed to measure how safe persons feel using the Canal.

Investigations- The improvements in investigation standards improved the police's ability to pursue offenders. Since the implementation of the minimum standards in February 2021 the arrest rate increased. Prior to this there had been no arrests for any of the previous offences. Since February 2021 eight people have been arrested and investigated for sexual exposures. In total the arrest rate has moved from 0% to 35%.

Due to the improvements in initial investigations one suspect was linked with ten offences. He was subsequently arrested and charged by the Crown Prosecution Service with one offence.

The work around the canal has been shared with all officers and staff through 'OFFBEAT' magazine. This magazine allows any member of staff to see the work that has been done, empowering others to understand the importance of taking a problem-solving approach when dealing with crimes and not dealing with just the report in isolation.

The project was also entered into the Tilley Awards in England and was the overall winner in September 2022.



**38 reports of indecent exposure and suspicious incidents towards women and girls had been reported along the same stretch of canal in Woking in a space of 17 months.**

Investigations showed that there were multiple offenders. It was happening in broad daylight, during busy rush hour, along a well-trodden route. But despite all of this, there was little evidence to go on. Victims' concerns meant they didn't always report it to us immediately and offenders were able to get away easily through shaded woodland. In May 2020, Trichef Inspector David Bentley, who was Borough Commander for Woking at the time, began an in-depth analysis of the crime series and the area in which they were happening. Together, with help from Design Out

From an investigative point of view, the biggest problem was that victims often felt the behaviour wasn't serious enough to warrant a quick-time 999 call, so they often didn't report it immediately - or at all. Coupled with a lack of CCTV in the area, this meant that there were few investigative leads to go on in each of the cases.

**FINDING THE SOLUTION**

Having an in-depth analysis of the crimes themselves and what was contributing to them being able to happen was integral to finding a solution. Using the SARA problem-solving model, a holistic, preventative approach was constructed.

**This focused around five key areas:**

- CCTV: originally, there were no CCTV cameras covering the path. One was put in as temporary measure in response to the offences, but after this project, there will be six cameras strategically located to deter offenders and capture evidence
- Graffiti: this is where 'broken windows theory' came into play - a theory which suggests that evidence of low-level disorder must be tackled quickly ('mending the broken windows') or else problems in the area can quickly escalate. In short, if it looks bad and feels bad, it will inevitably attract bad, so the removal of all graffiti along the canal path and application of a graffiti-resistant varnish to discourage further vandalism was needed
- Overgrown shrubbery: cut back any areas of overgrown branches and bushes to improve visibility along the path and allow walkers to safely pass each other
- Early reporting: new signage was needed to encourage early reporting of suspicious incidents, as well as a social media campaign targeted at the victim demographic to get the message across.

**SECURING THE SAFER STREETS FUNDING**

Safer Streets is an initiative set up by the Home Office which grants police forces and local authorities funding to be used to make our streets safer, with a focus on introducing preventative measures to tackle certain crimes. The most recent round of funding late last year had a particular emphasis on the safety of women and girls, and it was clear that this would be a perfect fit for this project.



**LOOKING FORWARD**

The project is almost completed and we're looking forward to engaging with local residents and partnership working to evaluate how effective work has been in improving feelings of safety community and deterring offenders. As of early March, we have already seen huge b

Social media posts are also being used to ensure the public are aware of the work that has been completed which have received positive feedback.

Canal Watch- The implementation of Canal Watch has been a real success. The Canal Watch are now a self-efficient team who act as guardians for the Canal with no oversight from the police needed.

### **Agency and Officer Information:**

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