



SOCIAL
ENGINE

Reducing demand for prostitution - A behavioural insights project



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About Social Engine

Social Engine was founded in 2015 to support organisations to adopt an evidenced-based and insight-led approach. We work with charities, local authorities, social enterprises and other social purpose organisations to overcome organisational challenges through engagement, research and the practical application of evidence into practice.

Our work involves applying behavioural insights to support service improvement across a wide range of policy and service areas in order to improve outcomes for individuals and communities.

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Executive Summary

Project Aims

The overall aims of the project were to identify the factors that act as a deterrent or incentive to men who buy sex, understand the prevailing narrative about prostitution in Redbridge, and develop effective interventions to influence the behaviours and attitudes of men who buy sex.

Approach

We adopted a four-phase approach to the project designed to establish a robust understanding of the issues and then to develop and test a new approach.

Evidence and Insight Gathering

Evidence review

The aim of the evidence review was to explore the motivations, deterrents, interventions and ultimately to understand what opportunities there are to deter men that could be applied to Redbridge. The review examined the rationalisations that men use to justify their behaviour, the role of guilt and shame, and different interventions to reduce demand.

Stakeholder Interviews

To understand and explore the state of prostitution in Redbridge, and perceptions of these, we conducted 10 semi-structured interviews with key external stakeholders.

Key findings:

- Stakeholders often perceived men who buy sex as men seeking quick and easy gratification.
- Men buying sex were also usually embarrassed when caught, suggesting a degree of shame around the act.
- Many stakeholders felt that the visibility of policing or enforcement teams was a key factor in stopping men from buying sex
- Stakeholders felt that prostitution in Redbridge caused considerable distress within the affected communities, and was a major source of complaints to the council from local residents.

Surveys

As part of the evidence and insight gathering, we deployed two surveys to improve our understanding of the following:

- Men who solicit sex in Redbridge and,
- Community perceptions of prostitution in Redbridge

Men who solicit sex

Key findings:

- On-street prostitution continued during lockdown, albeit at a lower level.
- On-street prostitution is exclusively 'off-line'. Men who visited sex workers on the street did not make prior contact: they simply turn up on the road/street to find a prostitute.
- For men who visit sex workers on the street, there is a straightforwardness and ease which characterises the experience.
- Knowing that the woman was a victim of trafficking/slavery was the largest deterrent for men to buying sex.
- Other common deterrents included receiving a criminal record and public shaming online, in local newspaper or on a billboard.

Community perceptions of prostitution

Key findings:

- The majority saw prostitution as a significant issue in Redbridge.
- There was evidence of some empathy towards women involved in prostitution.
- Respondents were somewhat split between those that felt prostitution was a problem that could be tackled and those who thought it was inevitable.

Developing behaviourally-informed interventions

Hypotheses:

- Strengthening community visibility will increase perpetrators' perceptions of the costs and risks of being caught.
- Small but visible improvements to the local area will reduce tolerance of anti-social behaviour such as prostitution.

Underpinning our approach were a number of behavioural factors - such as simplification, sense of 'being seen/ watched', salience, messenger and social norms - which were consistent with the findings from our initial evidence and insight gathering.

Our interventions

Drawing on our insights that the most effective way to reduce the behaviour of men buying sex was to focus on community building, partnership working, and environmental improvements we created a framework, called "Ilford Lane Lives".

Beneath the overarching Ilford Lane Lives framework we developed a number of interventions. The intention was to provide a set of creative evidence-based interventions that could be rolled out as part of the project and beyond.

1. Faces of our Community

Our approach was to create visually appealing community art which brings some of the vibrancy of the daytime to the night. We wanted to remove opportunities for anonymity by reflecting faces of local people (including children) on closed shop shutters, to reinforce familiarity and connection.

2. Audio disruption

We designed an approach to enable CCTV operators to activate a voice message when they observed men apparently propositioning a woman for sex.

The approach aims to take away the feeling of anonymity, create cognitive dissonance, and make the area feel like less of a secretive, criminal place. The messages were designed as direct and challenging but not specifically referencing sex to avoid potential harm and unintended offense to passers-by.

3. Large format TV screens

The aim of these oversized screens (placed in Ilford Lane) was to provide a salient and location-specific message to people in the area. By day they were intended to convey messages supporting community cohesion and by night to alert would-be perpetrators that the area was under surveillance.

Evaluating our interventions

Given the complexity of measuring outcomes in a dynamic system such as this, we felt the best approach was to use a combination of evaluation methods and outcome measures to draw conclusions regarding the effectiveness of our interventions. Evaluation metrics aimed to assess number of men seeking to buy sex, their attitudes and behaviours, community visibility, improvements to the local area, and changes in local pride and tolerance of anti-social behaviour, including prostitution.

Findings

The impact of COVID-19 on the project

In early 2020, the evidence gathering and intervention design phase of a project was completed. The interventions were planned to be delivered from late Spring/early Summer 2020, which coincided with the seasonal nature of prostitution. However, the COVID-19 pandemic and subsequent lockdown significantly changed the context and footfall in the area decreased and rates of prostitution declined. Fines issued to men seeking to buy sex also decreased due to COVID-19 restrictions.

During the COVID-19 pandemic, Redbridge Council's focus was on responding to the public health crisis and the project was temporarily put on hold. As a result of lockdown, the nature of street sex workers in Ilford Lane changed, with a decrease in the number of Romanian women suspected of being trafficked by organised crime groups, and an increase in drug and alcohol dependent British women.

Contextual factors and a shift in priorities and focus

The focus on violence against women and girls in the wake of high-profile murders such as Sarah Everard and Zara Aleena led to a public consultation and the establishment of a Community Crime Commission to tackle crime in the area. The Commission identified five priorities, with prostitution subsumed into other priorities. Police operations and enforcement activity, including occasional plain clothes operations and night time patrols, helped to maintain low levels of prostitution. The context for the project shifted dramatically due to COVID-19, shifting community priorities, and changing Police and Enforcement activity.

Delivering our interventions

1. Faces of our community

A number of local businesses agreed to participate in the project to paint their shutters with community scenes and the Ilford Lane Lives branding. During the course of engaging local traders, it became clear that prostitution had reduced in the area. Nonetheless, the intention behind the Faces of our Community – to reinforce the positive image of Ilford Lane as vibrant remained appropriate and a series of shutters were still painted to reflect the Ilford Lane Lives branding.

2. Audio disruption

The council decided not to implement the intervention due to the significant reduction in street prostitution and changing priorities.

3. TV screens

Despite delays caused by planning issues and logistical factors, the TV screens were eventually installed in August 2022. During the day, the screens displayed a variety of short videos and images, including school children at play, primary school artwork, and short videos showcasing local businesses. At night, the screens showed enforcement and CCTV capabilities, PSPO signage, and community images with the Live Love Ilford Lane branding.

Incidents and perceptions of prostitution in the local area

A recent consultation by the council on extending the PSOP revealed that many residents perceive considerable progress in tackling prostitution, but they also highlighted the need to address wider issues of violence against women and girls.

Conclusions and Lessons Learnt

The Covid pandemic and the onset of lockdowns significantly changed the landscape for the project. The altered context for the project reaffirmed the benefit of locating the project within a longer-term process of regeneration and community-building. While not all of the interventions were rolled out during the course of the project, they remain viable options should the context change again and the issue of street prostitution arise again as a priority in the future.

Introduction

Background to the project

The London Borough of Redbridge (LBR) and a number of local partners have organised various initiatives to tackle the issue of prostitution on Ilford Lane over many years. However, the nature of the challenge frequently changes and the impact of interventions are often short lived. Typically, interventions have sought to punish and deter men seeking sex, with other activities designed to support sex workers to 'escape' from the industry. More recently, the council was keen to understand more about what motivates men to buy sex and critically, what influences and approaches can positively alter this behaviour. A significant concern is also to protect vulnerable women both within the industry and wider community. LBR wanted to use behavioural insight to develop an intervention that looks to tackle the problem and reduce demand among men who buy sex.

Prostitution itself is complex, and by definition happens in the shadows. There are multiple issues affecting women involved in prostitution, often addiction, intersecting with gender-based violence, mental health problems and poverty. More recently, trafficking and slavery has been a significant problem with its close connection to organised crime, causing conflict in the community and greater concern for the women involved.

There are multiple challenges with engaging men, including the secrecy and shame of purchasing sex, feelings of guilt, a transient population and differing cultural norms and expectations.

The effects of prostitution are often adversely felt in the local community and wider population. A review of local media coverage provides a good understanding of how the issue is perceived. A number of stories feature concerns relating to littering (condoms and promotional flyers), locals feeling intimidated by criminals involved in the sex trade, associated problems with drug use and sales, as well as concerns about the impact on children and family life. Ilford Lane, whilst it is a hotspot for prostitution, is otherwise a busy location with shops, transport links and housing co-located. Concern raised by local people suggests many feel it is blighted by the sex trade and that this in turn threatens the long-term future of the area.

Dealing with the issue is a priority for a number of statutory and community groups, but at the time of commission it represented a political priority. The Council has set out a strategic ambition to ensure that communities can benefit from regeneration, to improve family life and to tackle social challenges. An ongoing delivery plan recognises the importance of partnership working in tackling the root causes of challenges such as prostitution as well as

the wide range of support strategies that are needed to keep the women involved safe. It is intended that this project will provide new insight which can be of real benefit to the various partners and projects seeking to improve life in the borough.

There is a recognition that prostitution and how it is perceived more generally is an acutely 'gendered' issue, with a prevailing narrative that is inherently misogynistic and sees female sex workers 'blamed' for the industry and its impacts. Media portrayals of women can veer from 'temptress vixen' to the 'unclean untouchable'. Neither of these caricatures comes close to the experience of many women which is more realistically likely to involve multiple vulnerabilities, including experiences of abuse, poverty and ill-health. Working closely with support groups and other partners, the council continues to seek ways to support women involved in prostitution. Such activities have involved health advice, support with substance use, as well as benefits, housing and immigration advice. At the same time, the council is keen to explore ways to shift the focus from women to one which questions why men buy sex and to challenge the perception that they are 'innocent' parties in the trade.

The Council identified the need to learn more about the motivations of those men who pay for sex. In setting out the challenge there is a suggestion that if these men are made more aware of the pernicious nature of the sex industry – and in particular its links to organised crime – they may alter their behaviour. The project sought to address gaps in knowledge and to explore and test the potential for behaviourally informed approaches to tackling these issues.

A note on terminology: Sex work vs Prostitution

Often, the term "sex worker" and "sex work" are used to describe consenting adults who exchange sexual services for compensation. These have come to replace the terms "prostitute" and "prostitution" in many circles, which are seen by some as demeaning and dehumanising, with criminal connotations attached. We found that many of the women selling sex in Redbridge were victims of trafficking, and therefore did not fit under the consensual meaning of "sex worker", risking implying an agency that they do not have.

We have come to understand that referring to these women as prostitutes is also imperfect, due to not all the women selling sex in Redbridge necessarily being trafficked and secondly, and most importantly, due to the stigmatising nature of the word "prostitute" which plays a "role in fostering an environment where disrespect, devaluation, and even violence are acceptable responses" (Benoit, Jansson, Smith & Flagg, 2018¹). In this report, we use the

¹ Benoit, C., Jansson, S. M., Smith, M., & Flagg, J. (2018). Prostitution stigma and its effect on the working conditions, personal lives, and health of sex workers. *The Journal of Sex Research*, 55(4-5), 457-471.

terms "prostitute" / "sex worker" to mean someone (in this case, a woman) who sells sex; this may be someone who has been trafficked, or who is working of their own volition. This grouping and terminology are purposefully vague given the nuances and differing personal circumstances. It is worth noting that even in circumstances where women are working of their own volition, there are often factors such as drug or alcohol addiction which mean that their behaviours may be driven by desperation rather than positive choice.

Project Aims

The overall aims of the project were to identify the factors that act as a deterrent or incentive to men who buy sex, understand the prevailing narrative about prostitution in Redbridge, and develop effective interventions to influence the behaviours and attitudes of men who buy sex.

Components within this overarching aim included:

Primary objectives

- Understanding how men feel about buying sex
- Identifying what role localised activities have in reducing sex buying

Secondary objectives

- Understanding how beliefs about sex work shape the narrative, and if, and how, other factors such as socio-economic, religion or ethnicity may impact this.

Approach

We adopted a four-phase approach to the project designed to establish a robust understanding of the issues and then to develop and test a new approach.

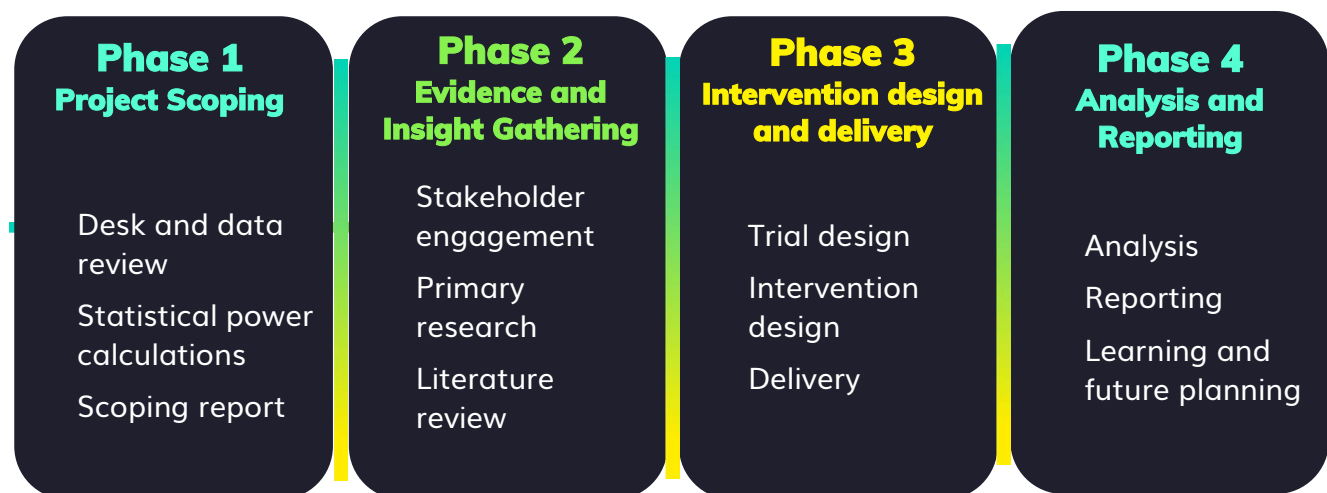


Figure 1

Research and engagement methods

We sought to gain first hand insight into buying sex via a range of research methods. The insight gathering phase was intended to produce evidence and understanding of the motives behind buying sex and the role and perceptions of the wider community in relation to men buying sex.

Desk research/data review

- We reviewed available relevant data supplied by the Council.
- We conducted a brief review of communications approaches and campaigns used within the borough and beyond.
- We undertook a review of academic and practitioner literature on prostitution, as well as evidence of effective interventions and deterrent activities that have been trialled.

Stakeholder engagement

- We explored perceptions of sex work and sex workers, the role of the community and the influences on behaviour - such as the media and organised groups – through 10 semi-structured individual interviews.
- These interviews were conducted with key external stakeholders, including community action groups, religious leaders, women's support groups and local business leaders.

Surveys

- **Community survey.** We developed a community survey to capture the perceptions held by Redbridge local residents regarding the issue of sex work. The survey explored three main aspects of sex work in Redbridge: Local communities' perceptions of prostitution, views on the role local communities, the Council and partners have in tackling the problem, and gathering opinions and ideas from local residents to address the issue locally.
- **Survey of men who buy sex.** We developed a survey to be taken by men who buy sex. This was to determine how sex buying occurs in Redbridge, and to understand these men's opinions on sex workers.
- **Interviews with men who buy sex.** We completed two telephone interviews with men who had responded to our survey. The aim was to learn more about their behaviours and attitudes.

Co-design workshops

- We worked collaboratively with the LBR project team and appropriate key stakeholders in a co-design session to develop our intervention plans.
- The session explored the current behaviours and underlying motivations among our target audience, based on the available evidence and insight, set expectations and

measurable goals of our intervention, as well as identified opportunities to influence behaviour change.

- The output from the workshop informed the design of our intervention approach which was tailored to address the psychological and behavioural drivers that contribute to the demand for prostitution.

Evidence and Insight Gathering

Evidence review

We reviewed evidence held by LBR and academic and practitioner research into prostitution. The aim of the review was to explore and understand more about the men who buy sex, their motivations, their deterrents, interventions and how they've worked, and ultimately to understand what opportunities there are to deter men that could be applied to Redbridge.

Rationalisations for buying sex

In much research, the majority of men who buy sex are shown to feel guilt and shame about their behaviour, but still continue to buy sex despite this. Although people may have formed intentions about changing their behaviour, this does not necessarily mean that they will actually change their behaviour. Behavioural science tells us that people's emotions and intentions do not always match their behaviour and actions. When this intention-action gap occurs, people experience internal conflict - also defined as cognitive dissonance - which can be psychologically painful. To resolve this conflict, people employ several psychological tricks (such as blaming others) which help to rationalise and excuse their behaviours in ways that help them to maintain their own self-perception. When it comes to buying sex, there are various ways men employ this tactic:

- **Belief as rationalisations.** Men who buy sex often adopt false beliefs which help to alleviate the guilt they feel buying sex. These beliefs help them have denial of the victim ("prostitution is a victimless crime"), denial of injury ("there is no harm involved") and advantageous comparisons ("prostitution is a more acceptable crime than rape").
- **Fear as a deterrent.** While much research indicates that men are deterred from buying sex due to the risk of arrest or being publicly outed, findings on deterrents are somewhat limited in the robustness of their implications because there is a considerable gap between what people say they might do – *they would stop buying sex if the risk of arrest was significant* – and what they will actually do.
- **Impact on the community.** Communities where on-street prostitution flourishes are often marginalised as "red light" districts. Other forms of crime, such as drug abuse,

drug dealing and robbery can take root, while the environment is degraded with discarded needles, used condoms, other forms of litter, and sex workers' cards in public telephone boxes. Kerb crawlers can harass women not involved in prostitution, and children can be placed in moral danger. In summary, it can become a 'signal crime' for the community.

The role of emotions: Guilt and Shame

Men who buy sex are likely to feel guilt and/or shame over their behaviour. When the feeling of shame is salient, this is more likely to promote maladaptive behaviours, while feelings of guilt are more likely to promote adaptive behaviours.

Shame

Shame tends to direct negative focus on the self, '*I did that horrible thing and others will judge me*' - which results in negative evaluations about one's core identity. This focus on the self disrupts one's ability to connect empathetically with others, as attention is turned inwards, therefore making choices that people may not realise actively harm others. Shame also prioritises the protection of one's vulnerable self-identity. As shame causes fear of being judged by others, the prioritising of self-protection relegates everything else (such as the welfare of others) to a secondary consideration.

Guilt

Guilt, on balance, appears to be less disruptive and more adaptive. Although painful, it is less devastating because what is at issue is a specific behaviour, rather than one's core identity. People experiencing guilt are drawn to consider their behaviour and its consequences.

Interventions/ Campaigns

Our literature review found evidence of a number of different types of interventions aimed at reducing demand for men buying sex.

Community Action

The **Neighborhood Safety Organisation's** guidelines to reduce street prostitution recommend three strategies; Communicate community disapproval of street prostitution (e.g., neighbourhood patrols, outreach to women), limit access to marketing space (e.g., change traffic patterns) and remove the sense of impunity for prostitutes and patrons (e.g., Postcard warnings to cars seen cruising area, loitering ordinances).

"Education Programmes – John Schools"

John Schools are programmes mostly common seen in US that aim to reduce recidivism of convicted sex offenders by educating them about the harm their behaviour causes to women.

Usually, men enter the “john school” thinking prostitution is a “victimless crime,” or that they are the victims of entrapment by the police. Some programmes use a confrontation “shaming ritual” that includes survivors of prostitution describing their experience and the damage and pain caused. Lack of evaluation data is the main criticism of John Schools – although it has been found that some programmes were successful in changing attitudes and future behaviour of men.

Public Shaming

Shaming is another strategy for targeting demand: The identities of men arrested for buying sex are publicised– typically through police press releases, billboards and on police websites. Revealing identities also pursues general deterrence – sending a message to potential buyers of sex that their identities will be revealed.

Public Education and Awareness Programmes

One approach involves signs or billboards informing men about police activity or consequences for buying sex. With messages such as: “Dear John’s, you’re not welcome in our community.” and “Dear John’s, your [licence] plate number is being recorded. Yours truly, the neighbors.”

This type of messaging is designed to deter buyers, as well as to convey a general message to the public about police action to address the problem - rather than to educate about demand to any real depth.

A programme called ‘Change’ was introduced by Hampshire Constabulary as a diversionary scheme in Southampton. Arrested men were offered the chance to take part in a one-day course costing £150 as an alternative to court. The programme involved a mix of formal presentations, group discussions, group exercises and role playing (Shell et al., 2001). The 45 participants were given attitude questionnaires at the beginning and the end of the course, and an estimated risk of reconviction for sexual or violent offence (OGRS2 score) was calculated.

Given that men with previous convictions for sex or violence were excluded from the programme, it was not surprising that the men were all in the low-risk category, and none were reconvicted. Participants’ views about prostitution and intentions to buy sex did show signs of change, however this may simply have been because participants provided ‘socially desirable’ responses. The small number of participants and lack of an adequate outcome measure or comparison group means the results of this study are inconclusive.

Redbridge Enforcement

To date in Redbridge, activities targeting men have tended to focus on enforcement. Public Space Protection Orders cover significant locations in the borough, or, in the case of prostitution, the whole of the borough. Breaches have seen men who purchase sex issued with Fixed Penalty Notices (FPN) and in some cases, court action. There has also been significant activity targeting the criminals involved in sex trafficking and organised crime and related immigration matters.

There is anecdotal evidence that FPNs are perceived as having some impact on reducing prostitution in Ilford Lane. However, it is worth noting that local enforcement data should be interpreted with some caution as these figures can only reflect those caught buying sex and it is likely that these men are not necessarily representative of all those who buy sex. Many men are more guarded about their use of prostitutes and attempt to hide their transactions when overt enforcement is present.

Reviewing data held by the Council on those issued with fines for breaching the PSPO highlighted the fact that a significant proportion of offenders were Romanian. Within the offender data held by the Council – 141 PSPO breaches in total - 45% of the FPNs issued were to Romanian men, by far the highest single group. However, there were also sizeable minorities of Western European, South Asian, and Middle Eastern men who were issued with fines.

Stakeholder Interviews

In order to understand and explore the state of prostitution in Redbridge, and perceptions of these, we conducted 10 semi-structured interviews with key external stakeholders, including community action groups, religious leaders, women's support groups and business leaders.

The questions for these interviews were designed in order to:

- Understand perceptions of the problem in Redbridge and the surrounding areas;
- Understand more about the factors that influence prostitution and the individuals that buy sex, and;
- Develop ideas to tackle the issue in the future.

Perception of men who buy sex

Stakeholders often perceived men who buy sex as men seeking quick and easy gratification.

"I don't think men overthink it – they don't think about the other person and how they got to be there. Instant gratification and how it lands is all they think about."

"I think it's about convenience and if they want something it's right there and about having that need being filled."

They also believed men bought sex as a means to exert control over women.

"I think sex is everywhere, pornography etc. They want to treat somebody badly – a release. Women are a commodity"

"Men on Ilford Lane – it's smart looking men who have fancy cars who buy sex. Sometimes just coming home from work. It's not always a need for sex but it's about control and that attitude of I can do what I want."

Despite this urge to feel in control, stakeholders said men buying sex were also usually embarrassed when caught, suggesting a degree of shame around the act (as well as fear of retribution).

"When we stop men, they are sheepish and embarrassed. They make up excuses such as it's my girlfriend and we say, "well okay what's her name then?" to catch them out and it usually works and they are embarrassed."

Tackling demand for prostitution

Visibility

Many stakeholders felt that the visibility of policing or enforcement teams was a key factor in stopping men from buying sex.

"I think the kind of thing that works is that visibility. When it's in your face. That's what reassures the public who complain. The visibility has worked really well, as has having the direct number to police."

"Visual deterrents and inceptions have worked the best – us acting as big brother."

Enforcement

Stakeholders mentioned some of the ways in which the law is enforced for men buying sex in Redbridge.

"We give them a £100 fine which is usually paid very quickly as men don't want to go to court and jokingly say, "pay otherwise if it goes to court people will find out what you have done" and it seems to work."

“We approach men who come and speak to women and after we have observed that initial encounter we would pursue them, normally alongside the police. Give them a warning or issue a FPN depending on the situation.”

“To get rid of the problem the council has put tremendous amounts of time and money into it. There was a special task force rolled out that drove the problem away but that might just lead to more brothels.”

Resident attitudes towards prostitution

Stakeholders felt that prostitution in Redbridge caused considerable distress within the affected communities, and was a major source of complaints to the council from local residents.

“The majority of them [the public] are just upset. It’s a huge issue. They complain about it to the top level e.g. council and the council will always manage to get funding if enough people complain. The problem has been cleared out but I think it only moves the problem to another borough.”

“You google Ilford and the first thing will be about prostitution!”

Surveys

As part of the evidence and insight gathering, we deployed two surveys to improve our understanding of the following:

- Men who solicit prostitutes in Redbridge and,
- Community perceptions of prostitution in Redbridge

Men who solicit prostitutes

Although engaging with men who have experience of buying sex is challenging and the numbers involved understandably small, insight into their experience and perception was important to understand their motivations, behaviours and influences on decision making.

The survey sought to hear from men who had experience of buying sex from prostitutes in Redbridge.

The survey covered the following areas:

- The experience of visiting a prostitute
- The concerns for women involved in prostitution
- The attitudes towards prostitutes

In order to connect with this audience, letters were sent out to men who had received a Fixed Penalty Notice (FPN) for behaviours relating to soliciting prostitution in Redbridge, asking them to share their experiences. Respondents were incentivised to take part with the offer of a £20 Amazon voucher. Additionally, we also created business cards promoting the survey, which were handed out by local enforcement officers on Ilford Lane and a Romanian language version of the survey was also run.

The survey ran during September and October 2020, and received 17 responses. The sample size is reflective of the secrecy in which soliciting prostitution is shrouded in for many men. It is worth noting that restrictions in movement as a result of Covid-19 were in place during the time.

Survey findings

- On-street prostitution continued during lockdown, albeit at a lower level. Whilst the majority (75%) of respondents reduced or stopped visiting prostitutes altogether during lockdown, a small proportion of respondents increased their visits. This increase in visits were exclusively involved in on-street prostitution.
- On-street prostitution is exclusively 'off-line'. Men who visited prostitutes on the street did not make prior contact. They told us that they simply turn up on the road/street to find a prostitute.
- For men who visit prostitutes on the street, there is a straightforwardness and ease which characterises the experience.
- Knowing that the prostitute was a victim of trafficking/slavery was the largest deterrent for men to buying sex, with 75% of respondents saying this would put them off. Other common deterrents included receiving a criminal record and public shaming online, in local newspaper or on a billboard.
- The men do not recognise their potential role in trafficking. Whilst the majority of respondents said that knowing a prostitute was a victim of sex trafficking/slavery would deter them from buying sex, when it came to their own visits, respondents did not acknowledge the possibility this had taken place. Cognitive dissonance exists between their own actions and the values they profess to follow.

Community perceptions of prostitution

A short survey was promoted via local community pages on social media, as well through paid advertisements on Facebook. The survey sought to explore:

- Local communities' perceptions of prostitution
- The role of local communities, local stakeholders and the council in tackling the problem
- Potential ideas for interventions

A total of 220 responses were received from members of the community.

Survey findings

- Prostitution was seen as a major concern for residents. Respondents saw prostitution as a significant issue in Redbridge, however, they were most concerned about the physical signs of prostitution, and the association with gang-related activity than concerns for the women involved.
- There was evidence of some empathy towards women involved in prostitution. A majority of respondents (59%) felt that prostitutes should be viewed as victims rather than as criminals. Around half (51%) felt prostitutes were only in the role because they are victims of exploitation.
- Respondents were probed on whether they felt prostitution was a problem that could be tackled, or whether it was inevitable. Respondents were split with 40% agreeing it was inevitable, whilst 35% disagreed, highlighting that prostitution for many people in Redbridge feels entrenched.

Developing behaviourally-informed interventions

The evidence and insight gathered through our research and engagement activity was collated and analysed. From this, we were able to develop some initial hypotheses that informed our intervention design.

Hypotheses:

- Strengthening community visibility will increase perpetrators' perceptions of the costs and risks of being caught.
- Small but visible improvements to the local area will reduce tolerance of anti-social behaviour such as prostitution.

Underpinning our approach were a number of behavioural factors which were consistent with the findings from our initial evidence and insight gathering:

- 1) Observation and the sense of 'being seen/watched' as a powerful influence over behaviour.
- 2) Simplification – ensuring that the desired behaviour is perceived as being 'easy' to do.
- 3) Salience – novel or unusual approaches, imagery or messaging that capture people's attention.

- 4) Messenger – who a message is coming from (or who it's perceived to come from) is an influential factor in whether the message is listened to.
- 5) Commitment – people are far more likely to follow through a behavioural intention if they've made a commitment. From a social psychology perspective breaking a commitment can cause cognitive dissonance or reputational damage.
- 6) Social norm – when a behaviour is perceived to be common, others are likely to follow suit.

We recognised that part of the challenge around prostitution in Ilford relates to community perceptions and behaviours, and that potential solutions are, at least in part, about community actions. A deficit view of the area reinforces and perpetuates negative behaviours, and so we sought to harness the considerable strengths within the local community:

- Everyone should feel that Ilford Lane and the surrounds are 'for them' and that they are part of a vibrant, positive local area.
- Most people who live and work in the area do so positively. We wanted to create space for, and to celebrate this.
- Reinforcing the perception that there is 'no corner to hide' for those who visit the area for illegitimate means.
- Using a range of environmental improvements to help stimulate longer term community and regeneration plans.
- Partnership with community, faith, business and voluntary groups being at the centre of the long-term vision for the area.

Our interventions

We devised an overarching framework which reflected these emerging insights; that the most effective way to disrupt and reduce the behaviour of men buying sex in the area was to focus on broader community building, partnership working and environmental improvements that inhibit undesirable behaviours.

The intention was to create a framework which would act as an overarching identity for a number of interventions to fall beneath – as part of the project but also beyond the lifetime of the project. Our framework was called "Ilford Lane Lives", drawing on both the lives in and around Ilford Lane, and the active and dynamic nature of community life.

Beneath the overarching Ilford Lane Lives framework we developed a number of interventions that were designed to disrupt the behaviour of men seeking to buy sex and to reduce tolerance of anti-social behaviour through environmental improvement. The intention was to

provide a set of creative evidence-based interventions that could be rolled out as part of the project and beyond.

Faces of our Community

We found that many local residents currently feel negatively about Ilford Lane. By day the area is lively with a diverse mix of visitors and uses but by night this positivity can disappear and a less safe, comfortable and inclusive atmosphere can emerge. In this context, men who buy sex feel anonymous in the area at night, which facilitates their behaviour.

Therefore, our approach was to create visually appealing community art which brings some of the vibrancy of the daytime to the night. We wanted to remove opportunities for anonymity by reflecting faces of local people (including children) on closed shop shutters, to reinforce familiarity and connection.

Images 1 and 2 show the design concepts for the community art installations with mocked 'faces of our community' artwork.

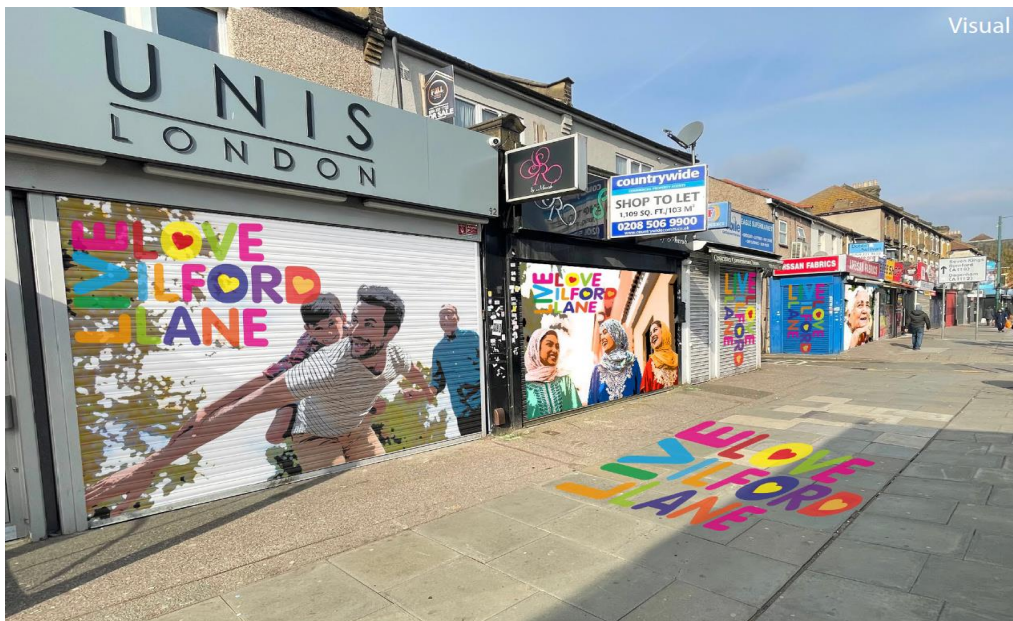


Image 1



Image 2

Audio disruption

The area around Ilford Lane traditionally most affected by men seeking to buy sex has extensive CCTV, with Council operators able to zoom in on locations and people of interest and to track potential offenders. The CCTV on Ilford Lane operates in four distinct zones with the operators able to move between all four to cover the whole road.

Taking advantage of this, and building on hypothesis about 'being watched' inhibiting undesired behaviours, we designed an approach to enable CCTV operators to activate a voice message when they observed men apparently propositioning a woman for sex.

Our research had underlined the sense of 'invisibility' felt by many men in the community and the ability to jolt them back to 'reality' was behind our approach to use young people's voices (including in community languages) to disrupt men in the moments prior to propositioning a woman.

From a behavioural insights perspective this approach to have a number of strengths.

- Take away feeling of anonymity
- Create cognitive dissonance
- Make the area feel like less of a secretive, criminal place

A series of messages were drafted, with examples recorded by a young person, adult woman (with a Romanian accent) and adult man for subsequent testing. It is important to note that

given the proposed use of this messaging in a public space, and to avoid further potential harm, the messages were designed as direct and challenging, but not specifically referencing sex. We were acutely aware that broadcasting more explicit messaging in a public space might cause unintended offence to passers-by.

Child's voice (suggested age 11-13)

In the first instance the surprise caused by hearing a child's voice, with a direct message to the male perpetrator, deploys 'salience' and potentially disrupts the course of action. Further this is intended to cause cognitive dissonance – or a sense of 'confusion' around the intention versus the experience at that moment.

"Ilford Lane is a community both day and night, be a part of our community and keep out of trouble."

"Ilford Lane is my home and I just want it to be safe. Please don't do bad things here."

"We are one community here. Keep out of trouble and help keep us all safe."

"My community keeps Ilford safe by keeping an eye out even at night. Don't be one of the monsters in the dark."

"CCTV sees all the monsters in the dark. Don't be one of them. Keep Ilford/our community safe."

More informational (voiced by an adult man)

"Illegal activities aren't tolerated in Ilford in the day, and the night isn't any different. Don't get into trouble."

"CCTV keeps our community safe day and night. Be careful what you get up to on camera. We can see you."

"The community keeps a watchful eye on Ilford, help us keep Ilford safe for all."

"The community keeps a watchful eye on Ilford with the help of CCTV, help us keep Ilford safe for me and you."

Heavily accented Romanian female voice (emphasis on community)

"What you get up to in the dark reflects on us all. We are better than this. Help our community thrive."

"CCTV works days and night to protect our community. Let's keep our neighbourhood safe."

"We are better as a united community. Stay out of trouble, and keep our home safe."

“Our community keeps a watchful eye on Ilford. Let’s stick together and keep Ilford safe.”

“It doesn’t have to be daylight to be caught on CCTV. We’re better than that. Keep out of trouble in Ilford.”

Large format TV screens

Around the time we were developing our interventions, the Council advised us that they had purchased a number of large format TV screens which were potentially available as a mechanism for delivering our messaging. These were a potentially useful tool to reinforce our two-pronged messaging approach; however, the specifications for screen content placed specific boundaries around what could be displayed. Content should not distract drivers such as might cause an accident, meaning that the screens are best used for messaging and animated content.

Type of content day/night

Our approach to content sought to draw a clear distinction between day time and night time messaging. During the day, the approach was to embrace and amplify community strengths and to highlight local businesses, community heroes (which was particularly relevant in the aftermath of COVID-19) and to amplify images of family friendliness.

By contrast, the night time messaging focused more on reminders about the CCTV presence, existence of the PSPO and the fact that anti-social behaviour would not be tolerated.

Community involvement in developing content

Colleagues within LBR undertook extensive outreach with community members, including local businesses and schools. By way of this they were able to secure video footage of many of the qualities of the area. These were edited for use on screen. Participants were very happy to showcase their businesses in this way.

Evaluating our interventions

Given the complexity of measuring outcomes in a dynamic system such as this, we felt the best approach was to use a combination of evaluation methods and outcome measures in order to draw conclusions regarding the effectiveness of our interventions. By avoiding relying on a single measure or data source, and instead drawing on a range of different sources and methods, provided a more complete and therefore reliable picture of the intervention effect.

Using a randomised controlled trial to evaluate our interventions was not deemed viable, as it was not feasible to randomly assign participants to treatment and control groups and there

was no practical way to track those who were exposed to the intervention and monitor outcomes.

Based on the two hypotheses which we developed through the evidence and insight gathering phase, we devised a series of evaluation questions:

- 1a. Have we made the risks and costs of being caught more visible to perpetrators?
- 1b. Has community visibility increased?
- 2a. Have improvements to the local area increased in visibility? Have there been visible improvements to the local area?
- 2b. Has pride in the local area increased and tolerance of ASB (including prostitution) reduced?

Evaluation metrics

- Number of men seeking to buy sex and numbers of prostitutes in the intervention area
- Number of men changing their behaviour while in the process of seeking to buy sex
- Change in perceptions of the Council's efforts to tackle prostitution
- Perceptions of the local area as a positive, friendly, welcoming place to live/work/study
- Perceptions of the shutter art images and any feelings they elicit
- Levels of discontent about ASB and prostitution in the area
- Number of local businesses, community groups and other agencies supporting the initiative
- Evidence of longer-term commitments (funding, activity, support) for improvements to the local area
- Attitudes towards prostitutes among the local community.

Findings

The impact of COVID-19 on the project

The evidence and insight gathering phase of the project and our intervention design were concluded by early 2020. Since the interventions such as the audio disruption, shutters and video screens all required significant development time to design and produce them, we planned to deliver them from late Spring/early Summer 2020. This timing also fitted with the

seasonal nature of prostitution – with instances increasing during the warmer months and falling back in winter. As COVID-19 spread to the UK and lockdown was introduced by the Government, the context within which we were operating altered significantly. With the introduction of lockdown restrictions, footfall dramatically decreased in the area and rates of prostitution similarly declined. Fines issued to men seeking to buy sex for breaches of the PSPO fell dramatically with the introduction of Covid restrictions as Figure 2 illustrates.

Between 2019 and 2020 fines issued for PSPO breaches fell by two-thirds and again by a further 50% the following year. In 2021 the number of fines issued were just 15% of the pre-Covid figures.

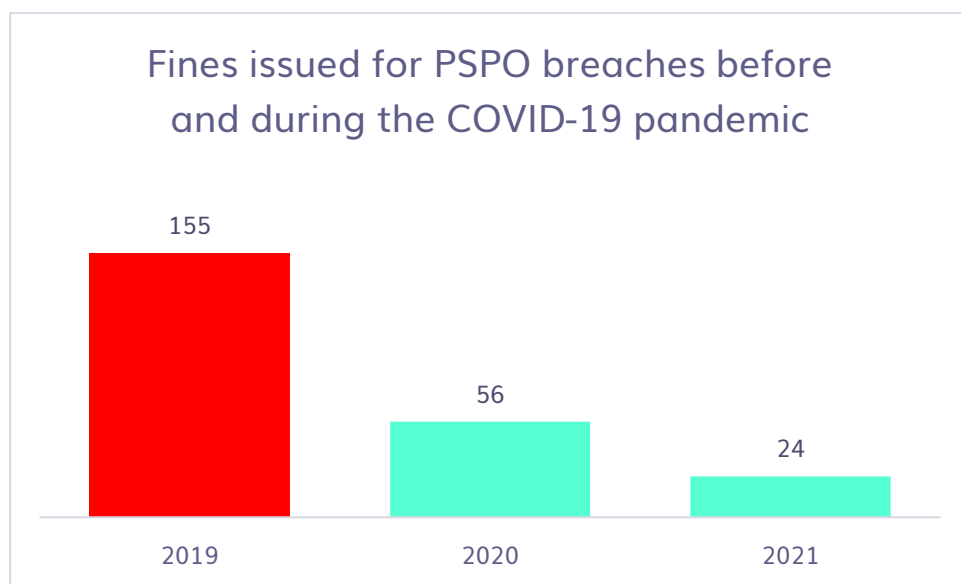


Figure 2

With coronavirus sweeping the UK, Redbridge – like every other council across the country – focused their attention on responding to the emerging public health crisis. As COVID-19 unfolded, prostitution was neither prevalent nor a priority for the Council and the project was temporarily put on hold.

During this period of COVID-19 lockdowns, the nature of street sex workers in Ilford Lane changed. Whereas prior to lockdown there had been a high proportion of Romanian women (suspected of being trafficked by serious organised crime groups), these women were no longer seen on the streets and those which remained tended to be drug and alcohol dependent British women. Prior to a period of sustained enforcement activity – immediately preceding the project – the figure was almost double at around 35 women each night. Redbridge's Community Safety Team estimates suggest that this figure has fallen to around 10 per week, almost exclusively from the cohort of local drug and alcohol dependent women who tend to be known to other public services. We understand that some Romanian women

have been sighted occasionally over the past three years – with the suggestion being that the organised crime groups might be ‘testing the market’ - but these have apparently been very sporadic.

Contextual factors and a shift in priorities and focus

COVID-19 had a significant impact on the nature, frequency and local perceptions of prostitution; however, this was not the only factor which altered the context for the project.

As the country emerged from the worst effects of COVID-19, a series of high-profile murders of women by men, both locally and nationally, such as Sarah Everard and Zara Aleena, caused Councils, Police Forces and communities across the country to focus attention on violence against women and girls. Communities responded with initiatives such as Reclaim the Streets and demands for authorities to act to improve women’s (and community) safety.

In Redbridge, the Council undertook an extensive public consultation – the largest in the Borough’s history - in the Spring on 2021 to understand public perceptions and priorities.

In response to the findings, the Council decided to establish a Community Crime Commission – an independently chaired inquiry set up to directly inform policy and resourcing of its efforts to tackle crime in the area. The Commission, which was made up of local volunteers all with deep roots in the area, heard evidence from the agencies who contribute to the fight against crime – police, education services, the public health system and youth services and commissioned research into local gang culture and the prevalence of domestic abuse.

Their extensive investigation and engagement led to a report setting out the focus for priorities and an accompanying set of recommendations for the Council. They found that residents had five priorities: street harassment of women and girls, domestic abuse, gang and drug-related crime, anti-social behaviour and burglary. Interestingly, and particularly pertinently for the project, tackling prostitution in the area was not identified as a priority in its own right, but rather subsumed into other priorities such as domestic abuse, gang-related crime and anti-social behaviour.

Police operations and enforcement activity has also had an impact on the local context over the course of the project. Dedicated Enforcement patrols of the area (which up until June 2022 also involved the Police) have helped to maintain low levels of prostitution.

Changes to the structure of the joint Police and REO team mean that Ilford Lane is no longer part of the patrol area, so they no longer carry out regular night time patrols. However, the Enforcement Team are still in the area until 2am every night and Police do carry out occasional plain clothes operations and night time patrols alongside the Enforcement Team.

These activities also include partners from Nia² in attendance in order to identify women potentially involved in prostitution and offer welfare/exit opportunities.

The illicit nature of prostitution means that enforcement can often result in displacement – with sex workers (and the organised groups that control them) seeking out alternative locations, often beyond administrative boundaries. In Redbridge, concerted enforcement activity has historically seen instances of local street sex workers reduce, only for numbers to increase in neighbouring Newham. Local intelligence suggests that the recent decline in prostitution in Redbridge, particularly among Romanian women, has been accompanied by an increase in numbers in Newham, however efforts to confirm this – and indeed to coordinate the availability of support services – have not been successful. It is also notable that digitally-based procurement (such as via an app) has altered the previous transactional norms meaning that pick-ups are not necessarily as regular as those seeking on-street sex.

During the period of the project beginning with extensive evidence and insight gathering, and the design and planned delivery of our interventions, the context for the project shifted dramatically. A combination of factors including COVID-19, shifting community priorities and a commitment to focus on them through the work of the Community Crime Commission and changing Police and Enforcement activity all contributed to create an environment which was materially different from that which the initial project scoping had uncovered.

Delivering our interventions

Faces of our community

Local businesses were approached about the project and a number of traders agreed to have their shutters painted with community scenes and the Ilford Lane Lives branding – ‘Live Love Ilford Lane’.

During the course of engaging local traders, it became clear that perceptions of prostitution in the area had shifted – certainly among those with businesses on Ilford Lane – with many small businesses expressing the view that prostitution was significantly reduced over recent months.

Nonetheless, the intention behind the Faces of our Community – to reinforce the positive image of Ilford Lane as vibrant, positive place – remained appropriate regardless of the apparent shift in perceptions surrounding prostitution. Consequently, a series of shutters were

² Nia is a support service for women and girls who have been subjected to sexual and domestic violence and abuse.

painted to reflect the local community and the Ilford Lane Lives branding, such as those shown in images 3 and 4.



Image 3



Image 4

TV screens



Image 5

The installation of the TV screens was considerably slower than had originally planned – due to a combination of Planning issues, logistical factors and the time required to produce dedicated, bespoke content to be shown. However, in August 2022, the screens were finally switched on.

During the daytime, the screens showed a range of short videos and images of school children at play; images of Primary School children's artwork depicting 'What Ilford Means to Me', and the Loxford School Media Studies short videos showing the shops, cafes and restaurants of Ilford Lane, all alongside images of the area's diverse community alongside the Live Love Ilford Lane branding.

At night time the screens were used to display content showing images of enforcement and CCTV capability, PSPO signage, again alongside images of the area's diverse community with the Live Love Ilford Lane logo and messaging.

Audio disruption

Although detailed plans for the implementation of our audio disruption intervention were put in place – including locations, messaging and the delivery mechanism – the changing context, with the significant reduction in street prostitution, and perceptions of prostitution as a local problem, led the council to decide that it was no longer appropriate to deliver the audio disruption intervention as originally planned.

Incidents and perceptions of prostitution in the local area

Fines issued to men for breaching the PSPO for seeking to buy sex offer a useful proxy indicator for the incidences of prostitution in the local area. As previously reported, the introduction of lockdown measures relating to COVID-19 resulted in a significant decline in fines being issued. Whilst the numbers have fluctuated somewhat, and the limiting effect of COVID restrictions has eroded following their removal, local community perceptions appear to reaffirm what local Community Safety practitioners have suggested – that the issue has declined significantly compared with before the pandemic.

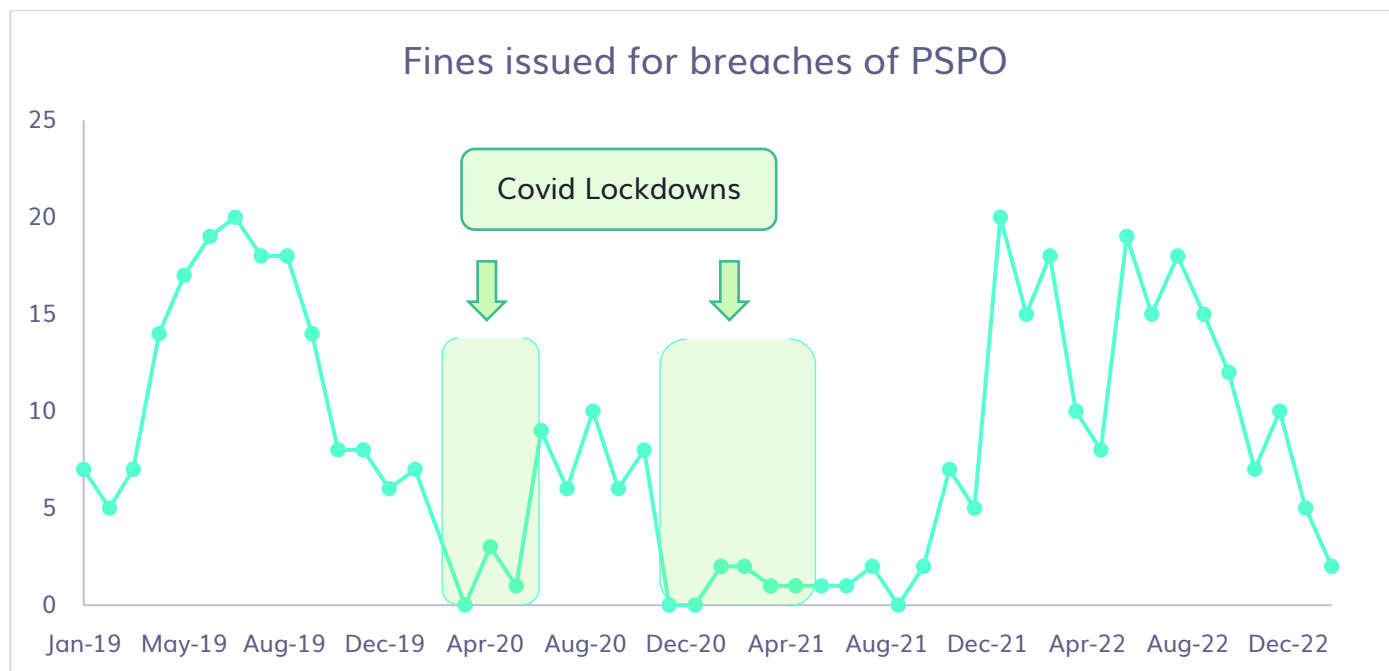


Figure 3

The Council recently conducted a public consultation on extending the PSPO and the responses provide valuable insight into community perceptions of prostitution in the area, and give an indication of perceptions of change over time.

Comments from community members in response to the consultation suggest that many residents perceive there to have been considerable recent progress in tackling prostitution. There were also a number of comments about addressing wider issues of violence against women and girls (VAWG) and of the importance of recognising sex workers as victims and the risk of simply displacing the problem to another area.

Recent progress made in addressing prostitution in the area

“We have seen significant decrease in prostitution on Ilford Lane due to fines and police presence”

“The programme has had a great success rate in the past years and as a resident I would like to continue support programmes like this”

“This scheme will help with that as I have seen myself what a big difference it has made”

“The results since the introduction of the PSPO are very impressive. This result should be built upon and continue to reduce the number of women involved in street prostitution even further”

“Since the introduction of PSPO we have seen a dramatic reduction in prostitution and crime associated with trafficking”

“We have had years of prostitution in the Ilford Lane area, as a community everyone’s efforts have seen a reduction”

Need to address wider issues of VAWG – not just prostitution in isolation

“Too many women are subjected to verbal or sexual abuse and this requires urgent action to be taken”

“I cannot walk through Ilford Town Centre without being harassed in some form by men. As a woman, it has deterred me from visiting here for years, opting to go to more civilised and cleaner shopping centres”

“It’s great that this measure is starting to act as a deterrent, but I truly believe that some men need educating as well. Providing accessible information on unacceptable behaviour towards women, not just in public, should be considered”

“When I was much younger, I was pestered in the street by men seeking prostitutes, because I was a female walking alone they thought I must be looking for 'business' though I was never dressed provocatively. I learned to ignore them but it could be alarming and I think females should be able to walk or wait to meet their friends without unwanted suggestions. If men learned there was no such 'business' on offer in our area life would be much better”

Concerns raised about displacement, encroaching on wider rights and that prostitutes should be viewed as victims rather than perpetrators

“My concern is the prostitutes will just move their service into other parts of Redbridge or into flats”

“It is much too vague, subject to an extremely wide variation of interpretations. It could be used to deny the legal right to free speech”

“We should not criminalise causing offence or distress. That takes the law beyond criminal offences and can harm free speech”

“...these are vulnerable women and targeting the demand should be a priority and safe keeping for the women. Many of the women are victims of trafficking even though they may not admit it...it's like there is no empathy for the women and they are seen as a problem that needs to be removed, disposed of rather than an individual that needs help, support and justice”

“It is imperative that the vulnerable are protected from being exploited that includes girls whom are trafficked for profit and put onto the streets as well as residents”

“We need to contextualise this situation and not be under the impression that this is 'eliminating' the issue. Sex work could be hidden further because of the PSPO, putting the women at further risk. Thinking outside the box and providing innovative rather than solely punitive measures alongside fines could be a possibility”

Perceptions of crime in Redbridge

A Redbridge Crime Survey ran from October 2020 to February 2021 and received over 2,000 responses, providing us with further insight into community perceptions of crime and safety in the local area. However, it is important to note that the survey was conducted throughout Redbridge, rather than Ilford Lane, and it was not possible to disaggregate responses geographically to determine whether perceptions were materially different in Ilford.

Most people said they felt that crime had increased in the area over the past year – but they don't see tackling prostitution as a priority compared to drugs, burglary and robbery, knife crime and gangs.

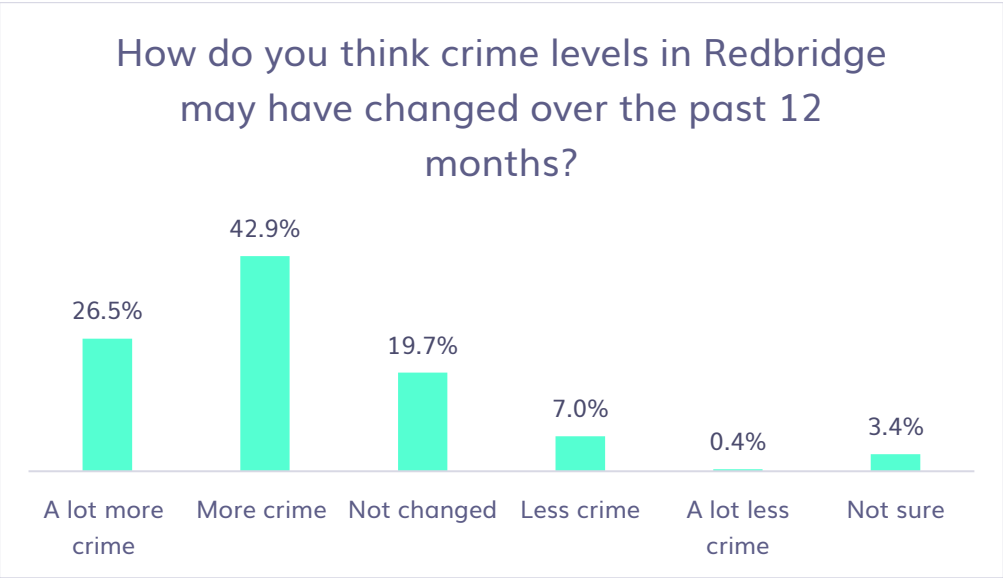


Figure 4
When asked what the priorities for tackling crime and community safety should be, modern slavery and prostitution were not considered priorities by local people.

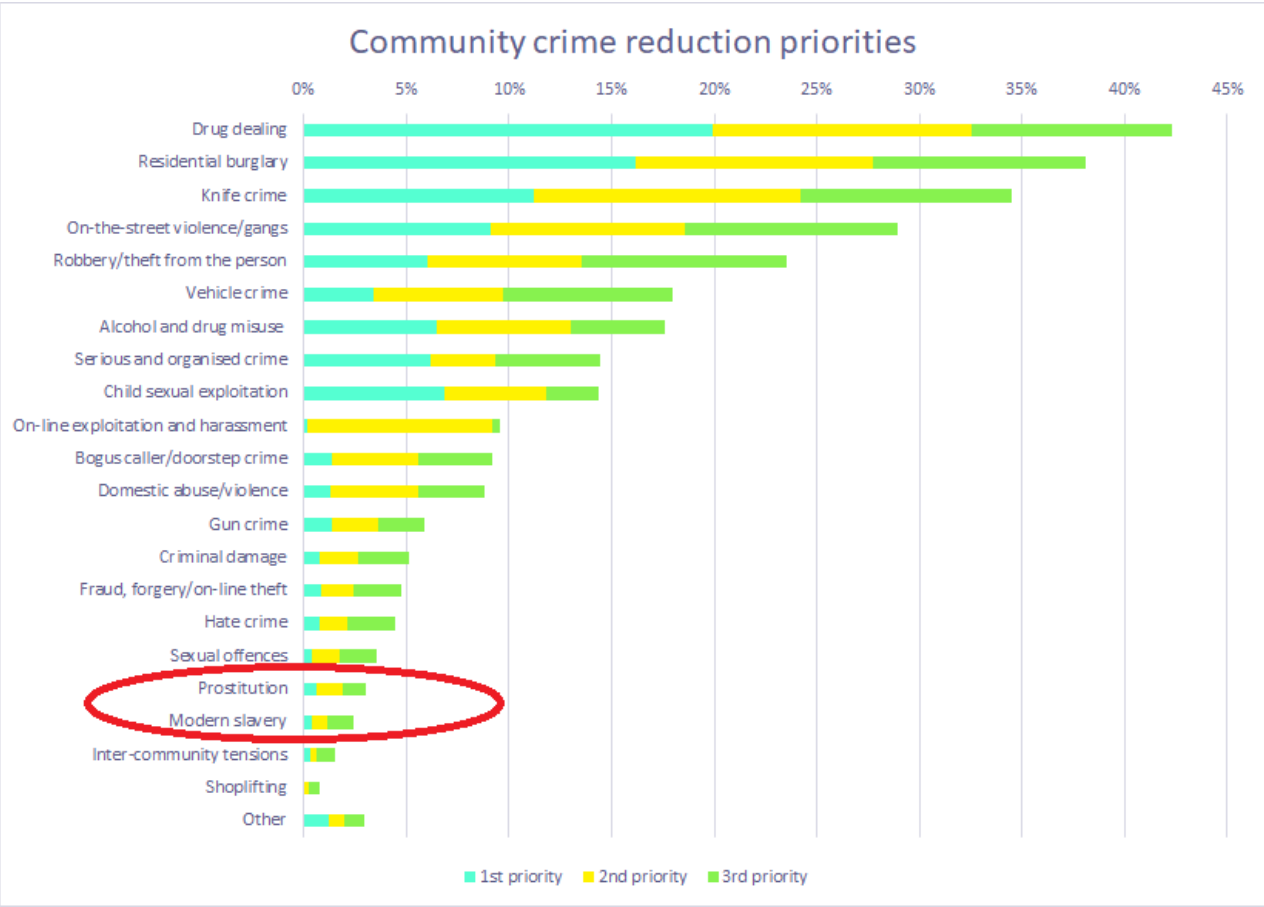


Figure 5

Whilst not directly comparable, community responses to the survey undertaken as part of the insight gathering phase of the project certainly indicated that prostitution was a significant concern for local residents at the commencement of the project.

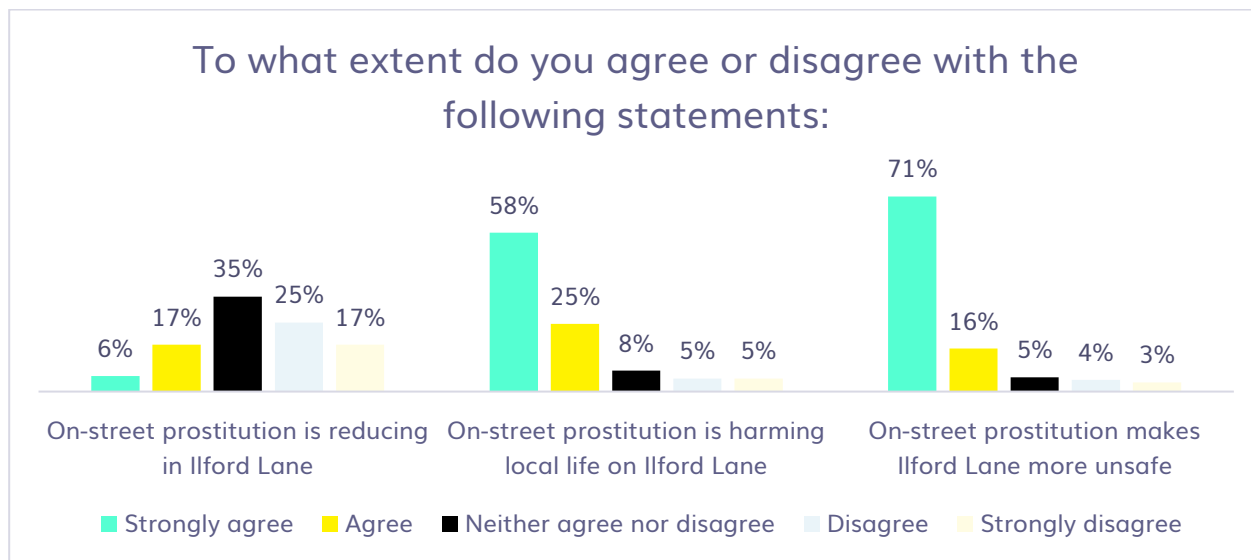


Figure 6

Conclusions and Lessons Learnt

The insight gathering and project scoping phase of the project occurred prior to the Covid pandemic and the onset of lockdowns which significantly changed the landscape for the project.

The significantly altered context for the project reaffirmed the benefit of our rationale to locate the project – and our interventions – within a longer-term process of regeneration and community-building. However, such an approach also posed something of a challenge to the Council and the project in the deployment of our interventions.

The reduction in the number of street-based prostitutes working on Ilford Lane understandably resulted in a shift in priorities and focus for the Council. While it is difficult to determine causality, it appears that community perceptions of prostitution as a major concern have diminished and consequently the focus of the Community Crime Commission – and subsequently the Council – has shifted to related but distinct priorities around VAWG. Whilst clearly broader than our focus on reducing demand for prostitution, there is a connection between tackling misogyny and discriminatory attitudes towards women and girls and perceptions of sex workers as victims rather than criminals. There is a close alignment too between the Council's wider goals and our intervention approach and underlying rationale –

that community visibility and improvements to the local area would reduce incidences of violence and anti-social behaviour.

Whilst not all of the interventions were rolled out during the course of our project, the insight which underpins them means that they remain viable options should the context change again and the issue of street prostitution arise again as a priority in the future.

Councils and the public sector can sometimes be accused of being too slow to respond to issues and changing circumstances and that they lack the dynamism and responsiveness of the private sector. This project highlighted the importance of maintaining flexibility in approach and being able to adapt to changing circumstances – simply, there is no point carrying on with something which is no longer relevant.

Taking a broader view of behaviour change

The 'prostitution project' is a useful example of behavioural insights in action – albeit that not all of the interventions were able to be delivered. It came about because of a strength of community feeling and against a backdrop where the statutory authorities felt that the tools within their toolbox were not able to 'crack' the presenting issue. The insight gathered from speaking to various stakeholders revealed that one of the most effective approaches was not actually going to be targeting the sex workers or 'punters' directly but in environmental and community influences. This is quite typical and very often we see that the routes to long term change need to focus on wider or underlying issues (e.g. community feeling pride, safe and empowered creating environmental changes that impede undesirable behaviour).

Within this project we identified a range of stakeholders who could, by their actions, enable or impede change. A number of these – such as community leaders, business owners, local activists as well as statutory partners are already working with the council or have increased engagement as a result of this project. In the case of business owners, there has been considerable outreach to them, listening to their concerns and actively demonstrating the Council's commitment to improvement, such as by the provision of shutter decals and participation in promotional materials.

Of course, councils everywhere have a need to engage with community partners. In undertaking this work Redbridge consciously sought to view the outreach within the lens of 'what's in it for me?' At all times asking 'why' would a partner want to be involved and 'how' would the activity be of value to them. This 'exchange' is a key part of effective working but frequently overlooked. It is also worth noting that developing a more 'relational' engagement, as opposed to the 'transactional' is a worthwhile step in creating genuine and ongoing partnership. At an early part of this project a faith leader stated,

“The council is always asking for our help, but when we want the road closed for a religious celebration they don’t want to know – working together cuts both ways.”

Redbridge is continuing to work to improve the area around Ilford Lane and the value in this can be seen in the many productive conversations had with local individuals and community representatives. A Community Crime Commission is a good example of this, a panel of local people joining together to consider crime in the area and to shape solutions. An activity that brought together lived experience, with input from agencies and academics to help explore and co-create solutions. This demonstration of commitment to the area is a key building block for long-term partnership and change.



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