

Operation yellow card

Published on 24 May 2025

Written by Sam Tucker, T/Inspector Michael Price, Dedicated Football Officer, Ops planning, Cambridgeshire Constabulary

Practice note: avoiding antisocial behaviour at football matches

Going equipped

Background

Through several years as operational football officers (OFOs) attending fixtures up and down the country, we noticed a growing number of young people involved in anti-social behaviour (ASB) and violence linked to football matches.

While we were seeing an issue at our own games with Peterborough United Football Club (PUFC), this was clearly a trend that impacted others. There is a known national issue of football hooliganism and ASB, creating challenges for policing such events.

We knew something needed to be done about our own games and this could not be done by police alone. We wanted to address this behaviour within the younger generation and divert them from becoming entrenched. This is where Operation Yellow Card was born, in partnership with PUFC.

Aims

The scheme, which is aimed at 15 to 23 year-olds, is a prevention tactic to intervene before serious offences occur. It alerts individuals, and often their parents or carers, of the need to make changes to their behaviour to prevent them from receiving long-term football bans and/or criminal convictions.

Through police enforcement and partnership intervention work with PUFC, the aim is to prevent a repeat of unacceptable behaviour by fans. Police are in regular contact with the safety officer at the club to discuss people who have caused issues, through daily phone calls and weekly in-person meetings.

How it works

As in a football match, Yellow Card is designed to be a caution to an individual regarding their behaviour. Initially they would be spoken to informally but if this behaviour becomes consistent, or an improvement is not seen, a community protection warning (CPW) can be issued. The CPW was introduced under the Anti-Social Behaviour, Crime and Policing Act 2014 to tackle long-term problem-solving. However, this scheme was the first to use it in a football context.

A CPW identifies a requirement for change from the individual. Parents or appropriate adults (AA) generally do not escort the young person to the various towns and cities that the fixtures dictate, however, they are required to attend the police station with the young person if a CPW is served.

By serving the caution at the station, it is hoped it will have a bigger impact on the young person's behaviour. It also enables officers to make parents and AAs aware of their safeguarding responsibilities in the hope they can play their part in changing the young person's behaviour. At PUFC, as with other clubs in England, the minimum age to attend a match unaccompanied is 14 years-old, so parents/AAs may not even be aware of what is happening.

Using a problem-solving approach through the deployment of OFOs, we identify a cohort of individuals who we believe would benefit from some form of intervention. The dedicated football officer (DFO) who manages the scheme then decides on an appropriate response to the individual's behaviour, in agreement with the safety officer at PUFC.

Action taken includes holding initial joint meetings between police, safeguarding leads, PUFC and parents and carers of the young person to educate them about the impact of their behaviour and potential action that could be taken. Home visits are then carried out by the DFO to explain the scheme to both the young person and their guardians, and set out the reparations.

Bespoke reparations are issued; however, examples of general conditions include:

- Attending the football ground in the company of an appropriate adult (replacing the club's policy for only under 14s to be accompanied)
- Sitting in specific locations within the ground
- Attending joint inputs from police and the club on football legislation

- Adhering to an exclusion zone – following repeated issues in specific locations based on the coming together of rival supporters, we have an exclusion zone for a specific period. This requires those within the Yellow Card cohort to leave the vicinity of the ground by an alternative route after the match has finished.

We also work with our local youth offending team. We deliver educational inputs at schools and colleges, alongside PUFC's safeguarding lead, around the current football scene and legislation covering anti-social and violent behaviour.

Outcomes

During the last two seasons, just 17% of the 30 people on the initial stage of the scheme progressed from a CPW to having a community protection notice (CPN) issued. 83% of those subject to a CPW intervention in this period did not reoffend. Only one of the CPNs issued led to prosecution.

The tiered intervention can be provided as evidence to support the necessity for a football banning order. Breach of a CPN can lead to arrest and ultimately courts can issue a banning order of up to 10 years depending on the severity. This prevents an individual from attending all football matches in the top seven tiers of English football.

The Yellow Card scheme has been received really positively by the supporter community. There has been feedback from fans who noted the absence of a similar scheme when they were engaging in similar behaviour in their youth. People have also thanked us for our interventions and diverting family members away from this troublesome behaviour.

Having been recognised as good practice nationally, it is being discussed as part of the DFO training with the UK Football Policing Unit (UKFPU). We hope to see it implemented across the country in the future.

- This article was peer reviewed by Police Constable James Woodcock, Football Coordination, Northumbria Police

Download Going equipped

This article is from the 10th issue of Going equipped.

- [Going equipped: Issue 10 Spring/Summer 2025 \(pdf\) 2.78 MB](#)

Tags

Going equipped