

'The alarm went off and I froze'

Helping a police officer steal cosmetics from a high street store is not something reporters do every day. Craig Blackburn took part in an undercover shoplifting exercise, the first of its kind in Falmouth

APPROACHING a shop in Falmouth I was nervous, my heart already racing.

I was about to steal some cosmetics from Superdrug. I've never nicked anything in my life.

As I entered the store with my accomplice, I immediately felt self-conscious. It seemed everybody was looking at me.

My colleague and I split up, pretending to browse. I tried not to look at the sales assistant. I failed. I couldn't help it.

I met up with my partner in crime, as agreed, in the aisle with the most valuable, and small, items which could be quickly stolen and concealed.

While he distracted the sales assistant, I grabbed a handful of lipsticks, the most expensive.

I expected a tap on my shoulder. Nothing.

I pocketed some eyeliner while my fellow shoplifter blocked the way. Still nothing.

Encouraged by my 'success', I stole some expensive face cream from the shelf and headed for the door, trying to fake a relaxed smile at the other shop staff.

One of the sales assistants was certainly not smiling. She started to approach me as we walked through the doorway.

The alarm went off – I froze. "Excuse me, sir," I heard her say. "Can you step back inside the door please."

Damn. The game was up. She called for police support on the radio.

"Why?" I asked. "We believe you may have concealed some items. Can we check your bag please."

"No problem," I said. The stolen items were in my pockets.

As the store staff rifled through my bag I felt a deep sense of invasion. I also felt anxious. I was sweating.

"And your pockets please," she said. They found the face cream.

By this time the store manager and a PCSO had arrived on the scene – and customers started to stare.

Arrest

I was taken into a back room and told to empty my pockets. The store manager scanned my collection of loot, which totalled more than £150.

I was placed under arrest, cautioned and my personal details were checked on the police system.

I was facing a trip to Camborne police station, where I would be strip-searched and put in a cell for up to eight hours while I awaited my fate, which could be a trip to a magistrates' court and, at the very least, a hefty fine.

Luckily, this was my first offence. And, thankfully, it was just a role-play exercise.

My fake accomplice was community police officer, PC Mat Cummings. Nevertheless, I felt like a criminal – and I was treated like one. It was horrible.



■ From left, PC Mat Cummings, reporter Craig Blackburn and PCSO Sean O'Donnell, above, outside Superdrug, Falmouth, during a shoplifting exercise and the loot Craig stole from Superdrug in a PCSO's hat, right.

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Officers pose as shoplifters to help stores fight crime

POLICE officers have been posing as shoplifters in Falmouth stores as part of an exercise to educate staff and improve communications between retailers.

The project took place on Thursday and Friday and was the first of its kind in the town.

It involved two plain-clothed police officers stealing items from shops and monitoring the response of the staff.

In previous operations, plain-clothed officers have patrolled stores throughout the town, but this was the first role-play exercise.

In each participating retailer, the shop management was in on the operation but the sales staff were not.

The project is part of the Shop Watch scheme, where staff in town centre

shops communicate between stores via radios.

The town manager also has a radio, along with pier manager and Kimberley Park staff.

Last week's role play was being led by PCSO Sean McDonnell.

"The aim is to promote the working between the police and the retailers and to promote the retailers working between themselves," he said.

"The idea of the exercise was to see how shop staff react in a safe environment.

"The radios can be used not just to contact the police, but to communicate with other shops, for example, when a suspect leaves one store they can radio to another shop further down the high street to pass on a description and warn



them that they may be heading in their direction."

The scheme is not only used to combat shoplifting. The town centre staff also act as extra eyes for community policing, looking out for other crime or antisocial behaviour.

One store manager, who did not want to be identified, said the exercise made him feel "good" that he was employing the right people after one of his sales assistants spotted an undercover police officer conceal some items.

"I really wanted to see how my staff reacted," he said.

"I think it is great that the police are making a bigger presence in town. Every shopkeeper has got to be aware of potential shoplifters."

New company launched by founder of charity closed after watchdog's criticism

THE founder of a charity that closed down after being criticised by a watchdog organisation is involved in a new company.

Manager Tony Lea dissolved Bufferzone, a welfare rights charity, following a damning report by the Charity Commission into how it operated.

Mr Lea has since become involved in the launch of Benefit Resolutions Ltd, a similar organisation based in Truro. It claims to offer a not-for-profit support service by assisting vulnerable people with welfare applications, tribunal representation and medical assessments.

A Charity Commission report into Bufferzone said: "We received a number of complaints alleging that vulnerable service users had felt threatened and intimidated by the charity. This included being pressurised to pay 'voluntary fees' in return for the charity's help."

"We also found serious concerns about the wider governance of the charity. The treasurer showed little knowledge of the charity's accounting



■ Tony Lea: involved in new company.

procedures and there were no ledgers or spreadsheets to manage the flow of funds or management accounts."

After the report was published, Mr Lea and other trustees dissolved Bufferzone and have since launched Benefit Resolutions Ltd, offering a similar service, with Mr Lea acting as manager.

Mr Lea said: "Bufferzone was set up in 2006 to provide hands-on support by making the appropriate welfare applications on our clients' behalf, and generally support clients through what is a

very difficult process. Further to malicious complaints from the public, I and the other trustees decided to close Bufferzone and move onto this new service."

Joy O'Gorman, registered director of Benefit Resolutions Ltd and former volunteer at Bufferzone, said: "Some of the recommendations made by the Charity Commission would have made it impossible to continue at Bufferzone. Therefore, we have set up an independent company so Mr Lea can continue to provide his valuable service and not be dependent on any public funding."

Benefits Resolutions Ltd requires an initial £50 deposit for all the company's services, with further fees charged for additional services, such as £100 for tribunal representation or £25 for form completion. The company said all payments were refunded if a claim was unsuccessful.

When asked why Benefit Resolutions Ltd was registered to an address in St Austell, Mr Lea said: "I do not want to make my home address public."