



Azalea

15

15 years, 15 stories, 1 van-tastic goal!

We wish there was no need, and ultimately our dream would be to not be needed.

But sex trafficking exists, and therefore so do we.

Over the last 15 years we have worked with **421** women in Luton alone and there are countless more we do not reach. For many years, the predominant group of women we worked with were British. British women who had been sexually abused as children, groomed into sexual exploitation, and/or raised in generational sexual exploitation. For years, these were the women who were the visible ones, the ones we met when on Outreach and who came to our Drop-In. However, the landscape of the sex industry is changing and the lines between those who 'sell' sex on the street, off street (brothels and clubs), and those internationally sex trafficked are becoming blurred as traffickers move women around various locations and settings. Every one of our regular Encompass guests see an increasing number of women who are from other countries in the various drug dens, brothels and houses that they frequent.

The merging of the three expressions of sex trafficking is a challenge that Azalea is ready for.

Increasingly, we are meeting women who have been internationally sex trafficked, whether through our street Outreach or through our partnership work with Bedfordshire Police and UK Border Force. Our numbers increased by **47%** since Covid-19 in 2020, and they remain high. In alignment with our core values of Courage, Approachability, Dedication, Empowerment and Trust – we need to respond and increase our outreach to women who have been internationally trafficked to the UK for sexual exploitation. For these women, the barriers to exit may look different to women who have been exploited and abused in the UK since childhood. Women who have been internationally sex trafficked may or may not have been abused as children, and may or may not have active addictions to harmful substances. Because of these variable factors, we do not feel it is appropriate or safe to host them in our regular Drop-In sessions, which could increase the risks to them. Our work with them currently takes place through assertive outreach (we go to where they are, we don't wait for them to find us) and 1-1 sessions at public places they are comfortable in. Yet we also recognise that we have a duty to reach out to them and offer the same warm, homely, safe, private welcome that we offer to all of our guests.

And this is where the mobile Drop-In van comes in.



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In order to offer an appropriate, purpose designed safe space to women who are surviving international sex trafficking, we plan to purchase and modify a van. For many in the UK, modifying vans is a hobby, or a way of life that brings a sense of freedom. We hope that for women who are surviving international sex trafficking it will be the beginning, and a significant part, of their journey to freedom.

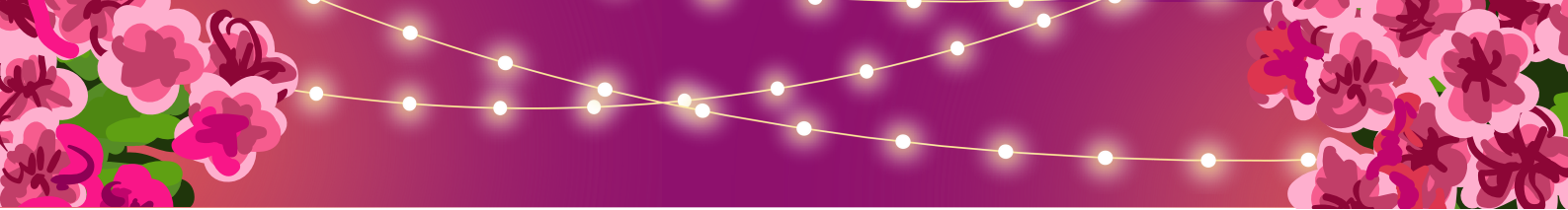
The mobile Drop-In van will offer a homely space for guests to sit, have a hot drink or food, homemade cakes, some clean clothes, safety kits, and a friendly face - all the things that are the hallmarks of our regular Drop-In. Yet this one will offer each individual guest a space away from the crowds, out of sight of pimps and traffickers, reduce the risk of being re-exploited and taken advantage of, and offer them the best opportunity for disclosures and relationship building with our specialist staff and volunteers.

It will enhance the support we currently give on Police and UK Border Force warrants; enabling us to bring our holistic approach to traumatic situations. This will ensure that all female survivors of sex trafficking are treated with empathy, trauma-informed care, and kindness in the aftermath of sex trafficking. This project has the support of Bedfordshire Police who, with partnership from Azalea, have led a new response to sex trafficking warrants, and who recognise the vital role this van could play in supporting the survivors.

"The Drop In utility vehicle offers an entirely independent, safe and, above all, private space for women and potential victims of crime to access. The very nature of the vehicle, being fully equipped with electricity, water, clothing, bedding, food and personal hygiene equipment to name but a few, allows the team to deploy dynamically and meet the demand of the vulnerable women it serves. Bedfordshire Police work closely with Azalea in a number of ways, one of which is in the management of victim reception centres. This type of vehicle would offer an invaluable resource in these scenarios, providing a safe space for potential victims of trafficking and exploitation at a crucial time for a potential intervention. But as we work together to reach out and engage with on street sex workers, providing an immediate warm and safe environment will encourage transparency, help us build valuable relationships and improve confidence in the police, as we work together to protect the most vulnerable." **A/DI Victoria Willett**

A/DI Victoria Willett has provided us with research into options of suitable vans for our needs, along with some ideas and designs of how we might have the van modified (appendix 2). As our interiors will be relatively simple - i.e. no toilet, bed, as you find in most van conversions - the modification costs will be comparatively reasonable. Amongst the Azalea staff and volunteer team, there is significant experience and interest in design, along with lengthy experience of the kind of trauma-informed interiors that are comforting and stabilising for our client group.





Data published on Modern Slavery and Human Trafficking is often scarce. Reliable data can be captured around the work that the Police and the Home Office conduct, but this only covers those who have been referred to the National Referral Mechanism (NRM), or offences that have been reported to the Police. The wider picture of human trafficking in the UK remains largely hidden and unknown, and is not represented in the quantifiable data collected. The Centre for Social Justice reported: *'In 2013 the Home Office estimated that there could be as many as 13,000 potential victims in the UK. Global Slavery Index 2018 estimated that there could be as many as 136,000 victims in the UK.'* (1)

According to the 'Crime in England and Wales' Police data published via the Office for National Statistics, there were 9,812 recorded cases of Modern Slavery between July 2021 - June 2022. Data published by the Home Office informs that there were 12,727 cases referred to the NRM during 2021, a 20% increase to 2020 (2). The Modern Slavery Helpline, through collecting data on their work (covering Luton and Bedfordshire), found that there was a 51% increase in survivor calls to the Helpline in 2021, compared to 2020. According to their data, the top five methods of control used are monitoring, tied accommodation, confinement and restricted movement, financial control and physical abuse (3).

UK nationals have always featured high amongst the Home Office data released detailing the demographics of trafficked individuals referred to the Home Office National Referral Mechanism.

However, a recent report published by the Home Office, compiling data for Q3 - July - September 2022, states that *'The number of Albanian nationals, which reached its highest figure since the NRM began, has surpassed UK nationals for the third consecutive quarter.'* (4)

London Luton Airport has frequent direct flights to and from Tirana, Albania, as well as from multiple cities in Romania. Romanians are a regular feature on Police reports on Modern Slavery in the UK. Another route into the UK is through lorries. Amongst our team there are first-hand experiences of working with women who were trafficked into the UK on lorries - and intelligence has been captured around Toddington lorry park being a key site on these journeys.

'Just 3.6% of men in the UK have paid for sex in the past five years, yet it is their demand that drives sexual exploitation' (5). Women do not drive the demand for sex, sex buyers do, many of whom come to Luton from surrounding towns and cities to purchase sexual services and enact violence against women. In our street Outreach work we are seeing increasing numbers of sex buyers between the ages of 18-25. 'Walk Free' - international human rights group - report that *'Women and girls are disproportionately affected by modern slavery, accounting for 71 per cent of the 40.3 million people living in modern slavery.'* (6)

For all of these reasons, and many more, **it is vital that Luton and its residents become increasingly proactive in creating a town that is intolerant to sex trafficking, and compassionate in supporting the women and girls surviving it.**

Currently, the partnership support Azalea offer to Bedfordshire Police means that we create and lead the compassionate and holistic response to survivors found during warrants. Since 2020 we have partnered with Beds Police and UK Border Force on over **16** warrants and operations. Women are brought out of brothels and taken to a Reception Centre, where Azalea, other stakeholders and Police Officers in plain clothing are waiting to welcome them. This response allows the women to be treated as victim/survivors, and not as criminals, and in return increases the likelihood of important disclosures being made and follow-on support being accepted by the survivors. During the very first warrant carried out with the Reception Centre model, Azalea trained over 100 officers to view the survivors as if they were a loved and cherished sister, niece, daughter - and to treat them accordingly. The van will allow us to bring this approach even closer - the van would be stationed close to the warrant sites, and bring the women into a warm and compassion led response more quickly. In moments like this, shortening the length of time between rescue and reaching the reception centre/van is vital. Any reduction in time, even down to seconds, can make all the difference between whether a woman will disclose the truth and access freedom, or be swayed into silence by other women survivors who are in fear. On smaller warrants, where a Reception Centre may not be warranted, or may not be possible to source, Azalea's van will provide the means of bringing the holistic response to the warrant.

We plan to purchase a van that is either new, or if second hand then a relatively new one, to help minimise maintenance costs in the first few years of the project, but also to increase the life of the project. Due to the major part of the project being a capital purchase, the running costs of the project will significantly decrease after the initial purchase and modification. We regularly maintain all of our vehicles to ensure they meet and exceed health and safety requirements.



The Encompass Drop-In, a warm, inviting, calming refuge - inspiration for our mobile Drop-In van.



Van Recommendations

Provided by DI 5376 Victoria Willett

Azalea's all-purpose support vehicle, order of preference:

- VW Crafter CR35
- Mercedes Sprinter (very similar vehicle to the Crafter)
- Peugeot Boxer/Citreon Relay/Fiat Ducato- all built on the same vehicle and a cheaper squarer option to the crafter/sprinter.
- Ford Transit T350

In terms of the conversion we would need to consider the following features:

- Solar panel (on the roof) which has the capability of providing 12 hours plus power to the electrical facilities for occasions when we do not have an electrical hook up. When we do have a hook up we will require a 12v / 240v electric hook up system.
- Fully insulated to allow for use all year use. This should ideally be sound proofed to ensure privacy is maintained.
- Electrical outputs including USB x 4. In the rear on both sides, next to the 2 rear travel seats with portable table to work on.
- Single hob and sink unit – gas. This will include storage cupboard underneath which will house the gas bottle and have a folding table to increase work top size. (Suitable for making coffee/tea/soup etc) and a small round sink. I probably wouldn't go for a underslung water tank as this needs to be maintained/cleaned and it would probably just as easy to take a big 5 litre bottle of water with you when you deploy.
- LED Lighting throughout/ reading lights over the desk and rear seats.
- Windows with tint at the rear for privacy and blinds for use during hours of darkness.
- Roof air vent - important to provide safe ventilation at all times even if vehicle parked up and left
- Two rear traveling seats, directly behind drivers seats. In front of two rear seats, a pull out portable table to work/eat on.
- Overhead cupboards left/right and rear to maximise storage space.
- The front seats should on be on swivel based enabling them to turn and face the centre of the vehicle this way you would create a good meeting/social space which would comfortably seat 4 people.
- This set up allows for 5 travelling seats with 3 point seatbelts.
- The vehicle to be carpet lined throughout with a non-slip floor covering.

There are countless conversions companies: I would recommend <https://www.rolling-homes.co.uk> as I have visited the workshops and seen the quality of the builds- they are also VW approved and will build whatever you require. I also heard and seen some great conversions by Custom Camper Solutions <https://customcampersolutions.co.uk> and Three Bridge Campers <https://www.threebridge.co.uk>.

Example: VW Crafter – You would require the High top in the top image.

