

**Abstract .The Tilley Award****: Operation ACNE'*****A multi-agency initiative tackling truancy, crime and fear of crime.***

'Operation ACNE' (All Children Need Education) is a small scale multi-agency project targeting truancy and its subsequent effects of crime and fear of crime caused by truants 'hanging around the streets'. It is run in the town of Whitehaven (pop. 27,000) in the Western Area of Cumbria Constabulary.

It arose after a need became apparent for key agencies to work together to reduce levels of truancy and truancy related crime after it was disclosed that Whitehaven School had the highest level of truancy in the county (2.8% 1996-97). At the same time, Whitehaven Chamber of Trade members were concerned regarding large numbers of youths creating a climate where fear of crime was having an adverse effect on town centre shopping. This adverse effect together with a suspected increase in truant related crime led to a pilot scheme run in July and September 1997 to establish first, if there was a problem and secondly, whether the agencies would be able to combine resources effectively. The evaluation of the pilot provided positive answers to both these points and as a result 'Operation ACNE' was born.

The resultant initiative, launched in the autumn of 1997 and still in operation today used key members of Whitehaven school, Education Welfare, Chamber of Trade and the Harbour Youth. Project working as **joint** patrols in company with uniform police officers to patrol the streets primarily in the town centre to stop and question suspected truants. Once stopped, details of the suspected truants were obtained and they were advised to return to school. Schools and parents were then informed of the incident but no attempt was made to forcibly remove a truant from the streets unless a criminal offence had occurred or there was a child protection issue.

The result of 'Operation ACNE' was to assist in reducing<sup>g</sup> the levels of truancy from Whitehaven School and to create a safer feeling to the town centre through reduction in the number of truants on the streets. As a result, the school unauthorised absence rate was assisted in its reduction from 2.8% (1996-97) to 0.9% (1997-98). This initiative was included in the Copeland Community Safety Audit and is the only scheme of its type in the county and one of a few in the country as a whole. The subject of Fear of Crime, which was tackled by this project, was continued as a strategic target in the Community Safety Strategy.

## **The Tilley Award**

# **Operation ACNE- Project Description**

## **Introduction**

Operation ACNE was conceived by the town centre sergeant at Whitehaven in West Cumbria, in conjunction with local agencies and the divisional community involvement officer with its aims of tackling truancy together with truancy related crime and disorder. This included Fear of Crime, which was generated by young people of school age roaming the streets creating problems both for shopkeepers but also to the perception of the town by local people.

The town of Whitehaven has around 27,000 residents and is situated on the west Cumbrian coast. It is regarded as a deprived area and has above average unemployment. A number of wards currently receive Priority 4 European Regeneration Development Fund finance together with Health Action Zone status, which covers the area. Two secondary schools, Whitehaven School and St Benedicts RC High School, each with over 1,000 pupils, serve the town. Both schools are to be found near the bottom of the education authority examination league tables with low expectations being common amongst pupils.

Finally, the schools are situated on the edge of town approximately two miles from the town centre. Although both schools were invited to the pilot scheme, it was the larger Whitehaven School, which took on the project having the highest unauthorised absence record in the county but also possessed senior staff ready to tackle the problem in partnership with other agencies.

## **Objectives of the project**

There were a number of objectives, which related to the cross-section of multi-agency representatives on the targeting group. The primary police objective was to reduce town centre crime, (in particular shoplifting which could be seen both within the Police figures and through the Chamber of Trade's own figures of shop crime) and Fear of Crime caused by local youths 'hanging around the streets' rather than being at school. These police objectives linked directly into school and education welfare objectives of reducing levels of unauthorised absences, which were the Main performance indicator in terms of the total number of truants.

## **How did you define the problem**

The principle problems were apparent from two separate non-police sources. The first related to frequent complaints by the Chamber of Trade to the town centre area officers regarding truants causing problems of a criminal or anti-social nature. The second related to Cumbria Education Authority figures of unauthorised absences in Whitehaven School, which has a roll of over 1400 pupils.

This data together with Police information of town centre shoplifting and evidence of anti-social behaviour, suggested that a number of the truants were coming into the town centre and broadly corroborated the above data.

In July and September 1997, a total of four pilot truancy patrols were undertaken between the Police and Education Welfare officers to establish the nature and extent of the problem. These patrols were aimed at establishing if a significant number of truants were coming into town and secondly, whether the key agencies involved could work together especially on the combined Police/agency patrols on the street. The results of these patrols were to confirm the earlier reported problems and a decision was made by the relevant agencies to allocate the necessary resources to address the problem.

### **Resource and Cost implications**

The evaluation of the pilot scheme had shown that this new initiative could work and that by working together, we could hope to tackle a problem which had its source in school but whose effect had implications on a number of other agencies.

As 'Operation ACNE' is small in scale tackling a local problem, an agreement was reached to allow each agency to take part in a time-limited capacity such that a clear understanding of the time allocation was needed for the project to succeed. As a result, it was decided that one hour per week would be given to the patrols by each of the agency partners on a rota basis, with the administration of the patrol details being initially handled by the police. All the follow up enquiries and any further action would be dealt with by the schools and education welfare officers respectively.

The school passes were designed and printed by Whitehaven School. As the scheme expanded, they used their design to supply other schools with passes allowing a simple, cheap system for pass production.

The overriding principle of the scheme was to keep it simple but effective so that costs were kept to a minimum. This was achieved by targeting patrols with times and dates to achieve the most likely results (e.g., mid-morning on market days).

### **How did you deal with the problem**

As truancy is primarily an education authority problem, (although the effects are felt in other areas of the community), the focus of the initiative was to develop a climate in which a pupil truanting from school would feel uncomfortable about the situation and at the same time set a standard that truancy would not be tolerated.

The key to the image of the project, which was widely reported in local press, radio and regional TV, was the name, Operation ACNE. The name ACNE was chosen as it stood for 'All Children Need Education' and was designed to emphasise the positive roles that the group tackling the problem was trying to achieve. The group was very keen to use the press to bring the attention of the scheme to children and parents as well as to highlight the issues.

The key elements in the strategy for dealing with the problem are as follows: -

- i/ Introduction of school passes
- ii/ Inter-agency support of the passes
- iii/ Create a positive image of project
- iv/ Press liaison to enhance awareness
- v/ Joint agency truancy patrols
- vi/ Crossflow of information
- vii/ Evaluation
- viii/ Expansion

These areas will now be looked at in more detail.

**i/ Introduction of school passes**

A new school pass was created by the school with clear guidelines being set as to when it should be issued. This also provided a means to be legitimately out of school such as for a doctor's appointment. These passes were made by the school printing department and later adapted for other schools as the scheme expanded.

**ii/ Inter-agency support**

Once passes had been issued the guidelines were reinforced to pupils by involvement of the uniform Community Involvement officer attending the school and speaking to each year group in assembly, explaining how the scheme would work and reinforcing the positive message of 'Operation ACNE'.

**iii/ Create a positive image of the project**

From the time of project launch on 25<sup>th</sup> November 1997 a positive image of the project was projected. This was to dispel ideas that it might seem excessive *by* some people. To achieve this, the key message put forward was that we had the interests of children at heart. One immediate result was that in a number of families it became apparent that the parents were given a reason to send a child to school and not 'turn a blind eye' to truancy or condone their absenteeism by not confronting it.

**iv/ Press Liaison**

One of the key elements was to maintain a high press profile in order to create a climate in which truancy was seen as unacceptable. The launch of the project saw considerable media input with local papers (Whitehaven News and the News and Star), Radio Cumbria and Border TV news programmes all attending. The interest generated allowed us to follow up with the media as the project continued. This involved further coverage using Whitehaven Rugby League team players to re-inforce the message allowing local celebrities and role models to give weight to the initiative.

**v/ Joint agency patrols**

The most controversial aspect of the scheme but also one of the most effective related to the joint agency patrols of Whitehaven town centre. The patrols involved a uniform foot patrol officer who was assigned to accompany one of the agency members.

The participatory agencies in the foot patrol including senior teachers from the school, an education welfare officer and a member of the Whitehaven Harbour Youth Project who gave a non-statutory agency view on the initiative.

Each patrol lasted for one hour and was operated on a weekly basis. The procedure would be to walk through the town centre and speak to any person of apparent school age who was seen on the streets. This included children who were with adults. They were asked for the reasons they were not at school and asked to return to school if they were suspected of truancing. Details of the truant would then be passed onto both the school and education officers for parental contact where appropriate. Unless a crime has been committed or there is a view that a child is at risk then no further Police action is taken and the matter is dealt with through the education authorities.

**vi! Crossflow of information**

The scheme is a true multi-agency scheme in that once a protocol was established principally between the Police, Education Welfare and Whitehaven School the need for crossflow of information, particularly in relation to targeted problem areas identified by the police, persistent truants and legitimate reasons for being off of school were quickly sorted out between the agencies. Regular patrols gave rise to regular contact allowing potential problems to be dealt with before they developed.

**Evaluation**

Evaluation has been a constant undertaking throughout the life of Operation ACNE.

Prior to the start of the project, a pilot project was carried out with four patrols being organised to establish the scale of the problem. This initial evaluation provided a source of evidence to develop the project and allocate resources.

The second project evaluation occurred in the New Year 1998, some two months after the project launch when the combined Christmas anti-shoplifting and truancy patrols could be evaluated.

A further evaluation can be seen in the unauthorised absence levels of Whitehaven School, which have seen a marked decrease.

**viii! Expansion**

As a result of the second evaluation,, the scheme was offered to both neighbouring secondary schools and primary feeder schools in the area. This arose after it was discovered that a number of our truants were from secondary schools not involved in the scheme.

Also, local primary schools wanted to give a positive message to their pupils on the need to maintain good attendance records.

As a result of this expansion, Ehenside secondary school at Cleator Moor came onto the scheme, as did the majority of the local primary schools.

Whilst the inclusion of primary schools was not anticipated to assist a current reduction in town centre crime or fear of crime problems, it was felt that a setting a good standard could be established at an early age such that later truancy related problems could be reduced.

### **How successful was your approach**

Establishing quantitative measures of success when dealing with issues concerning fear of crime are difficult to establish, however clear performance indicators in relation to Education Authority unauthorised absence levels, retail shoplifting records as well as police figures in relation to Operation ACNE lend support to its effectiveness.

In terms of analysing the results of the initiative, there are three sources of information. These are Police figures, which relate the initial launch of the initiative to a separate crime operation to establish a crude relation of committed crime to truants and to the level of truancy. Secondly there are Cumbria Education Authority figures for unauthorised absence to compare the levels before the scheme and onwards. Finally there are retail crime figures relating to a longer time period during which Operation ACNE was one part of an overall strategy.

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#### **i) Initial evaluation of 'Operation ACNE'**

Once Operation ACNE was launched in November 1997, there were eight patrols in the run up to Christmas. At the same time,, a separate Police operation targeting pre-Christmas shoplifting, 'Operation Clean Sweep' ran in Whitehaven. The combination of the data from both the operations give some indications of the level of truancy and truancy related crime.

**In the eight patrols 42 children were stopped of whom 28 could give no Satisfactory explanation as to why they were not at school.**

**In the same period, 16 arrests were made during the shoplifting operation, 9 came under the youth court jurisdiction and 4 were committed by suspected truants**

#### **ii) Unauthorised absences**

The unauthorised absence record at Whitehaven School across all school years shows a dramatic decrease of around 70%.

<b>1996—97</b>	<b>2.8%</b>
<b>1997 -- 98</b>	<b>0.9%</b>

**Source: Cumbria Education Authority**

iii) **Retail shop theft**

Figures produced by the Chamber of Trade cover a three-year interval during which a number of initiatives, (including CCTV introduction), were implemented to reduce town centre crime, of which one was Operation ACNE. This reveals that during this period, a reduction of about 30 % in average shop crime was reported. Whilst a large proportion of this can be attributed to CCTV, the use of CCTV to enable the targeting of local 'hotspots' for truancy patrols also proved effective. This has further reduced the opportunity for truancy related crime.

<b>1995</b>	<b>£680 per week</b>
<b>1996</b>	<b>£240 per week</b>

**Source: Whitehaven Chamber of Trade**

**Conclusion**

○ Although the major emphasis on the scheme was during the 1997-1998 school year, 'Operation ACNE' has continued at targeted times of the year such as the pre Christmas period. Although the reduction in unauthorised absence is substantial, it does relate to the effect of a number of school initiatives. However, all the key agencies taking part in the initiative state that the nature of the scheme and its high profile, has succeeded in bringing truancy back onto the agenda as something that is unacceptable and reinforces the message.

From a police perspective, this has had an effect in reducing levels of crime, fear of crime as well as strengthening links between agencies taking part and the Police.

Finally, for an independent view on the need for 'Operation ACNE', evidence was provided in June 1.998 when the editorial comment of the Whitehaven News was devoted to the subject (see Figure 4).

The paper reported that whilst truancy may be seen as a harmless pursuit by some, it also pointed out that, "...it is a big problem. And it affects all of us." 'Operation Acne', is one initiative that has aimed at tackling this and in doing so has received a large degree of public support to all the key agencies working together to achieve this.

### **Other information**

The key members of the truancy group 1997 — 1999 are: -

Sgt Mark Jenkins	Cumbria Constabulary (Town Centre supervisor)
Pc Stuart Burgess	Cumbria Constabulary (Community Involvement)
Stan Aspinall	Headteacher (Whitehaven School)
Barry Armstrong	Education Welfare Officer
Craig Kershaw	Chair, Whitehaven Chamber of Trade
Helen Bunting	Whitehaven Harbour Youth Project

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