

LOVELL AVENUE

South Gloucestershire District Chief Superintendent Hems

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Summary

Lovell Avenue is a cul-de-sac in the Oldland Common area of South Gloucestershire. The road consists of 19 properties that are a mixture of privately owned and local authority housing, with a population of elderly residents or families with young children.

During the summer of 2001, police received numerous calls from the residents complaining of the anti-social behaviour of young people congregating in the street. Their actions involved noise, foul language, minor damage to residents' and council property, along with dangerous driving, underage drinking and suspected drug dealing. Residents resorted to writing letters to the local police station and council complaining that they felt like prisoners in their own homes.

The difficulties in dealing with this problem promptly were hampered by a large area of recreation ground to the rear of the properties, which enabled the youths to escape quickly via several exits.

A surveillance operation was set up by the police to tackle immediate criminal offences. This resulted in ten arrests of which six resulted in a charge and conviction. The action attracted press coverage and immediately signalled to the community that their concerns were being taken seriously.

It was apparent that this problem could not be solved by the police alone, and a meeting was arranged involving the residents, council representatives and the police. Together, several courses of action were decided. It was necessary to combine the immediate police response with longer term actions. These are summarised below:

Police — A crime reduction survey was carried out which recommended some environmental changes including blocking the footpath leading to the recreation ground. Encouragement was given to the residents to form a Neighbourhood Watch group. This was supported by a continued presence in the area at relevant times.

Local Authority — The construction of a fence between Lovell Avenue and the recreation ground was investigated and arranged by council workers.

Youth workers — Barriers have been broken through the actions of the youth workers. They have provided encouragement to local youths in organising a skateboard park to be built, and arranged for a local youth club to extend its opening hours.

Environmental Health — Arranged to clear the area of rubbish and graffiti, and arranged for repairs to damaged council property.

97 calls were received by the police between June and September; This reduced to 2 between October and January. This represents a reduction of 98%.

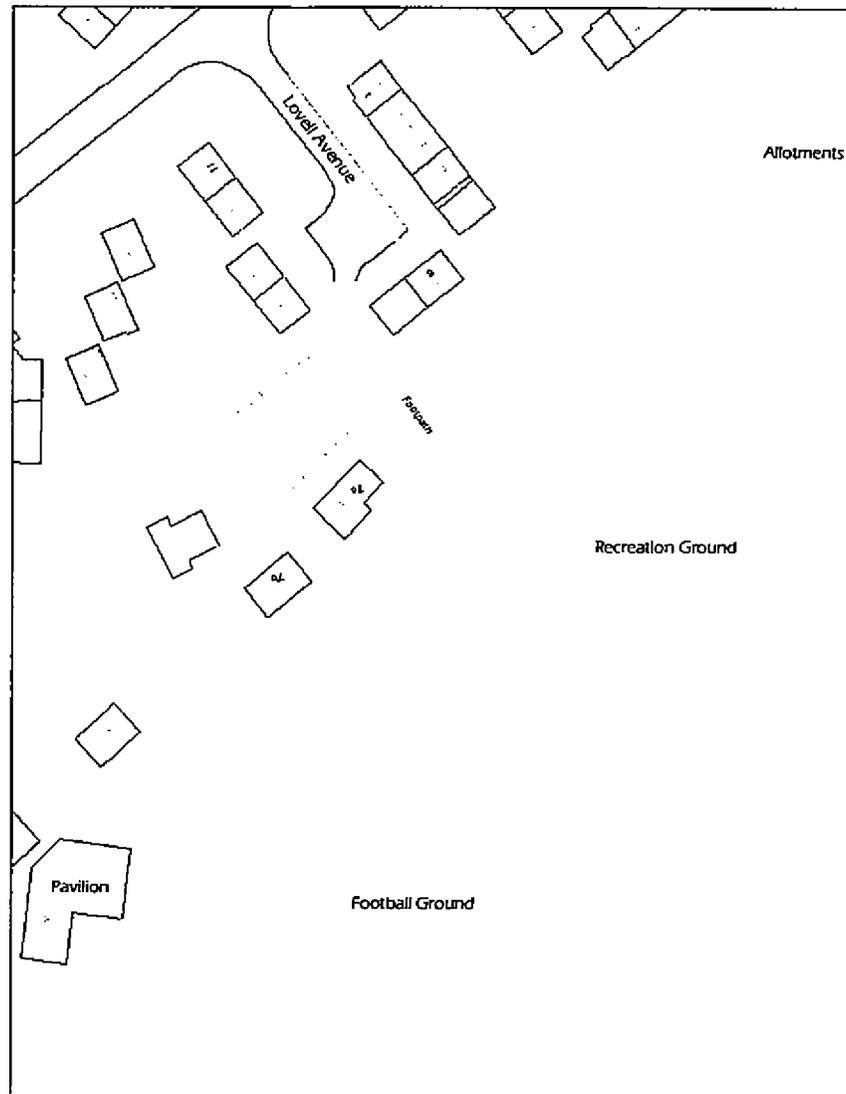
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Introduction

Lovell Avenue is a cul-de-sac in the Oldland Common area of South Gloucestershire. It was constructed as a local authority housing development, but during the 1980s many of the properties were purchased privately. Currently the population is a mix mainly of elderly residents and young families.

The below map shows the location of Lovell Avenue in relation to a large area of recreation ground situated behind the houses. This recreation ground houses a local football club with a small spectator stand, public allotments, and a large area of open ground. This can all be accessed via a footpath leading from Lovell Avenue.



The History

During the late 1980s, the area was brought to the notice of the police when calls were made regarding young people causing a nuisance in the street. The local press printed articles relating to the problem, but their focus was on the fact that no crimes were being committed and indicated an acceptance of the propensity for people to congregate. Individual incidents were dealt with by the police when necessary, but there was no pressure to solve the root of the problem and no attempt was made. Although this problem persisted for some time, eventually faces changed and the gatherings petered out.

The Problem

Number 7 Lovell Avenue is occupied by a family with a teenage son. By May 2001 the address had become a central point for young people from the surrounding areas to meet. It was seen as a convenient place to meet and socialise, which became more attractive with the obvious tolerance of the teenager's mother.

Initially, the gatherings were fairly small and were confined to the immediate vicinity of Number 7. However as the weather warmed, numbers increased and the gatherings spread into Lovell Avenue itself. Residents reported groups of up to 50 youths gathering in the street. They would arrive in cars or on motor bikes or mopeds, frequently blocking residents' access to their garages. Often these groups would congregate in the late afternoon and not begin to disperse until the early hours of the morning.

As time progressed, the behaviour of the group deteriorated and reports were received of damage to residents' property, foul language, noise, urinating in public and drinking — mostly underage. More seriously, a smaller group of around 10 individuals were apparently taking advantage of the large numbers of youths and supplying drugs.

Residents felt intimidated and were not comfortable leaving their houses, even to sit in their own gardens, due to the verbal abuse they encountered from the youths. Young children in the Avenue were not able to go out and play in the cul-de-sac due to the youths driving cars and motor bikes at speed into and out of the road; and many were too frightened of the youths to want to play outside. The lateness of the gatherings also affected the residents as they were unable to sleep due to the noise at night. This would upset the young children, and cause stress to those having to work the next day.

Problems with the cars were experienced by the residents as they would speed into and out of the Avenue apparently with little regard for the safety of residents. When stationary, the cars would generally prevent access to the garage block, and loud music would be played. The youths would show no intention of moving their vehicles in order to let residents have use of their garages.

The demand for a police presence grew, and in June 2001, 16 calls were received from residents for the police to attend and deal with the youths. This was one fifth of all the calls received on the beat. However, when the police arrived at Lovell Avenue, the youths were able to leave the area via the footpath to the recreation area behind the properties. From here it was possible to disperse through a number of different exits back to the roads. Once the police left, the youths would often gather again immediately in the knowledge that they could again leave quickly via the recreation ground should the police arrive again. On several occasions, the police were required to attend more than once in one evening.

Life was becoming intolerable for the residents in the street. They were frustrated that the police were powerless to deal with offences that were being committed to their property and their fear of crime was making them prisoners in their own homes. At the peak of these disturbances, it was common for up to 100 young people to become involved. A small group had been identified as 'leaders' and it was strongly believed that if these could be targeted, others would be less inclined to gather at that location and many of the remaining problems would disappear.

During July and August 2001, Lovell Avenue became the most resource intensive location on the Staple Hill sector. 62 calls were received during the two months – more than any other single location on the sector.

Residents became so concerned that they submitted letters and petitions to both the police and the council in South Gloucestershire demanding that action be taken to remedy the situation once and for all.

The scale of the problem required a series of actions to be undertaken in combination which would achieve the following four objectives:

1. To work in partnership with the residents, the council and other local agencies to provide a robust, multi-agency solution (allowing the residents to have a say in any proposed action).
2. To reduce the demand on police resources in the long term. This problem had been identified 10 years earlier and needed to be stopped permanently.
3. To engage with the young people and address the reasons for their behaviour. To work with relevant agencies to provide facilities that they require and would use.
4. To restore normality to Lovell Avenue allowing the residents to live free from the fear of crime and disorder whilst restoring their sense of community.

The Response

Phase 1 — Operation Dorking

The first step was to deal with the immediate problems being caused by the youths gathering in the Avenue. Operation Dorking was initiated in July 2001. This aimed to use high profile weekend patrols of the area along with covert observations to gather evidence of any offences taking place, in particular drugs offences. The residents agreed to provide an observation post in the Avenue for the purposes of surveillance.

The high profile patrols took place on Friday and Saturday evenings and involved regular patrol officers, the support group and special constables.

One occasion involved a group of around 40 young people who had gathered in the Avenue and were throwing missiles at the police. On this occasion, riot shields were needed to be used in the dispersal of the group. Special Constables involved on this day were noted for their professionalism and good work reports were submitted in recognition.

As a result of the operation the following was achieved:

- There were 23 seizures of alcohol from underage persons
- 31 letters were sent to parents under Operation Foster, notifying them of their children's behaviour
- 2 young people were taken home to their parents to be advised personally by the police
- 10 arrests were made between the 1st and 21st of August.
 - 6 resulted in a charge and conviction
 - 1 resulted in a reprimand
 - 1 was released without charge
 - 2 of the arrests were for breach of bail and incurred no separate penalty

The action attracted press interest and articles were printed in local papers detailing the work of the police and the arrests and convictions. The public support and recognition helped to make huge inroads in gaining the trust of the people that this was affecting the most.

Phase 2 — The Long Term

Although the immediate police response was considered to be successful, it was also apparent that further action would be required to deal with the surrounding issues and solve the problem in the long term. A police response would not be sufficient for this, and so the involvement of other local agencies would be necessary. It was also important to include the residents at this stage to ensure that they had an opportunity to have an input into how the problems could be resolved.

In August 2001, a meeting was convened between the following parties:

- Environmental health workers
- Housing officers
- Local councillors
- Police
- Residents
- South Gloucestershire area facilitator
- South Gloucestershire outdoor spaces officer
- Youth workers

Initially the problem was seen solely as a police problem which no one else could have any impact on. However, as the meeting progressed, it became clear how the residents and each of the agencies could play a role in an overall solution. The only successful way forward would be to work together.

It was apparent that the source of the problem revolved around the occupants of Number 7 Lovell Avenue. South Gloucestershire housing confirmed that the occupier was also the owner of the property. This restricted any actions that could be taken against them, for example eviction would not be a viable option, only criminal offences could be dealt with.

The police continued the meeting by explaining what enforcement actions had been taken to date. The difficulties encountered by the police were highlighted, referring specifically to the escape routes readily available to the youths leading through the recreation ground. It was agreed by all that if this route could be closed, the offenders would be more vulnerable to enforcement action and therefore make the area much less attractive to those with unlawful intentions. Various options were discussed as to how best to restrict access, however it would first be necessary to research whether the footpath could legally be blocked. It was important to fully involve the residents in this decision, as the leisure facilities afforded by the recreation ground would be severely restricted to them as well as to the youths if changes were agreed.

There was also an assurance from the police that a visible presence would continue to be provided at the location in order to deter the youths from gathering and deal with any offences as necessary.

A suggestion was also made that a Neighbourhood Watch Scheme could be set up for the residents of Lovell Avenue. This would encourage them to work together in the future in a structured way, and allow a greater partnership with the police in problem solving.

Environmental health committed themselves to clearing the area of rubbish and graffiti. This was mainly a problem around the garage block and electricity sub-

station. Housing would work to repair the damage to street furniture. These two actions would visibly improve the environment and were intended to provide a positive message to the residents that the situation was improving.

Youth workers would attend Lovell Avenue to speak with the young people involved and begin to break down barriers. The problem needed to be solved in the long term, it could not just be moved to another area. In order to achieve this, the views of the young people were necessary so that investigation could be made into suitable alternative activities for them.

All of these tasks were taken on enthusiastically by the agencies involved.

The following is a summary of the actions agreed at the meeting.

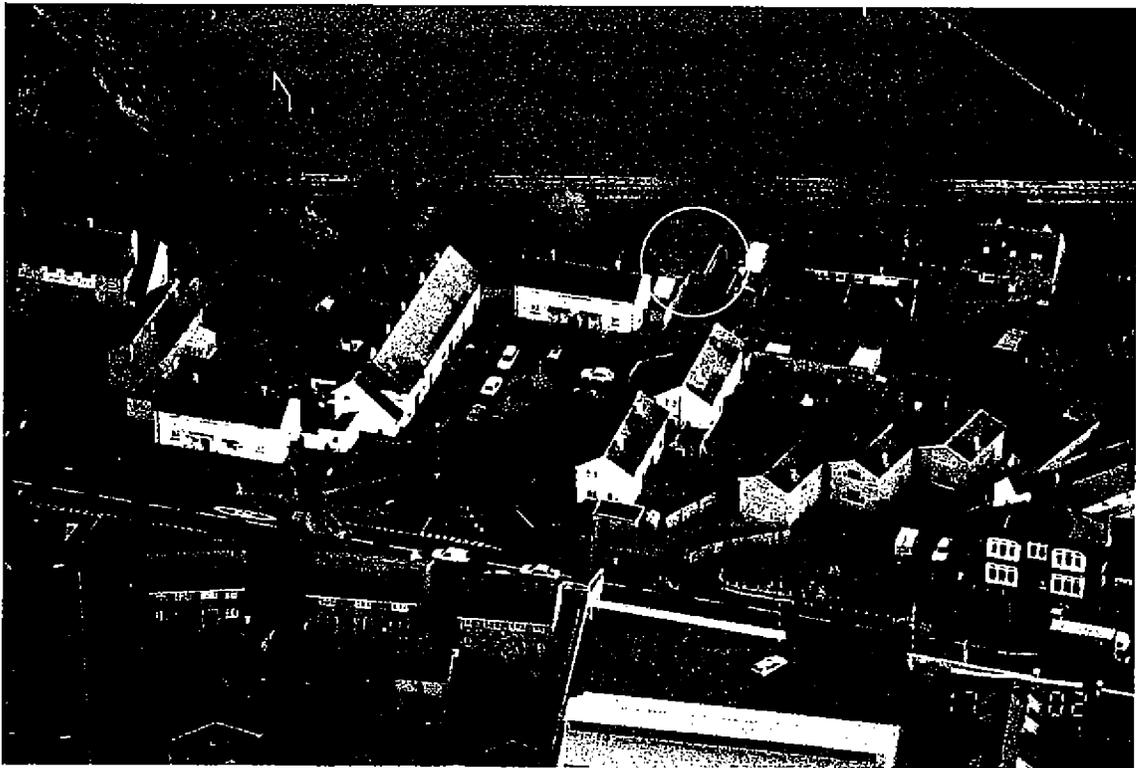
1. To investigate whether the footpath leading from Lovell Avenue to the recreation area can be blocked off. It would be necessary to check whether the pathway is a Public Right of Way or adopted highway. Consultation would be required with all parties involved (e.g. the football club)
2. To investigate whether a gate could be put across the road by the garage block to prevent cars from gathering here. (This was later rejected by the residents in preference of speed ramps being placed in the Avenue to prevent cars racing in and out of the road.)
3. To obtain the registration numbers of the cars that are generating loud music. Action can then be taken under Environmental Protection.
4. To provide a 'Residents Only' parking sign
5. To investigate a different type of coping stone for the top of residents' walls to prevent young people from sitting there.
6. To clear the rubbish that has accumulated around the garage block and electricity sub-station.
7. To work with the young people to provide suitable alternative activities for them.
8. To provide a continued police presence.
9. The Crime Reduction Unit from Staple Hill police station agreed to attend and conduct an environmental survey of the area.

Steps Taken

The results and convictions from court of those arrested had now filtered through to other youths from the group as well as to the public and this alone discouraged a number of supporting members from attending the street. None of those arrested have come to the notice of the police since their convictions.

It was established by South Gloucestershire council that the footpath was not a public right of way and could therefore be blocked between Lovell Avenue and the recreation ground. The residents agreed that access to the fields needed to be closed, as despite the earlier Operation by the police, there were still a significant number of gatherings of youths occurring in the Avenue. The outdoor spaces officer from South Gloucestershire council costed the project at around £4500 and confirmed that this money would be made available through Community Safety funding.

With the agreement of the residents, the fence was constructed at the end of September 2001. This left the Avenue with just one entrance and exit.



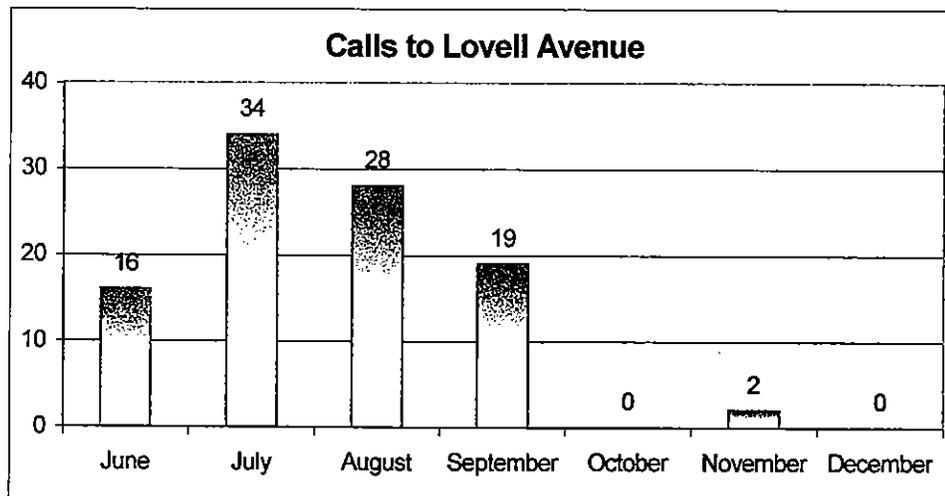
The residents have recently made enquiries about starting up a Neighbourhood Watch Scheme with South Gloucestershire police. This should be in place in the near future. In the mean time there has been regular contact between the beat manager and the residents allowing them to voice any concerns they have regarding the current problems.

The Youth Workers began talks with the youths with the support of the local beat manager. The indication was that further activities / locations needed to be provided as they felt there was little else for them to do at certain times. The Youth Workers arranged for a local youth centre at nearby Cadbury Heath to extend it's opening times to hours that were more suitable for the youths. The centre attracted a large number of people from that area.

The youth leader for the area had engaged these young people in a project to build a skateboard facility in Longwell Green as an additional activity area. This work resulted in the young people themselves opening an account for and arranging fundraising, and conducting a full consultation with regard to the siting of this facility. By encouraging them to become fully involved in this project, the eventual facility will be owned by the young people themselves. This project is being supported by the Cadbury Heath Community Safety group and the police crime reduction budget in addition to various events organised by themselves.

Measuring Success

Since June 2001, the number of calls to the police to attend Lovell Avenue has reduced dramatically. From being the most attended location on the sector during the summer months, only two calls were received between October and December.



The residents were each asked to complete a short survey in January 2002 in order to compare their concerns and quality of life before and after the project, and into the future.

Ten replies were returned. As expected, those living at number 7 declined to answer the short survey. Eight of the respondents believe that the actions taken to date have either fully or partially solved the problem. This is tempered by most with a concern that as the weather improves, the problems may start up again.

Six out of eight respondents clearly state that they feel safer since the installation of the fence, particularly during dusk or darkness. (Two of the papers were not completed correctly for this question)

Every one of the respondents felt that they had an opportunity to voice their opinion as to how the problems could be solved. Nine felt that the different agencies had worked effectively together and with the residents to achieve a common goal. (One respondent felt that this was not the case but gave no explanation as to why this was).

The outcome overall shows that the residents are on the whole very happy with the involvement and actions taken by different agencies.

The following table shows how each of the original objectives have been achieved over the course of this project:

To work in partnership with the residents, the council and other local agencies to provide a robust, multi-agency solution (allowing the residents to have a say in any proposed action)	This has clearly been achieved through site meetings held with the residents and various agencies. Actions agreed have been taken up enthusiastically by the relevant agencies
To reduce the demand on police resources in the long term. This problem had been identified 10 years earlier and needed to be stopped permanently	Early indications are that police resources are required far less frequently than previously. STORM logs indicate a massive reduction in calls to Lovell Avenue
To engage with the young people and address the reasons for their behaviour. To work with relevant agencies to provide facilities that they require and would use	Youth workers have made inroads by speaking with the youths, organising for the local youth club to open with extended hours and by encouraging the youths to take some responsibility for arranging a skateboard park in Longwell Green
To restore normality to Lovell Avenue allowing the residents to live free from the fear of crime and disorder whilst restoring their sense of community	The residents' survey indicates a great improvement in feelings of satisfaction and a greater feeling of safety in the local area. The residents have also made enquiries about forming a Neighbourhood Watch scheme for the Avenue. This will help the residents to work together in the future and restore their sense of community.

The problem *has* shown significant *success over the past few months with a* considerable drop in the requirement for police resources, and far greater feeling of security from the residents of Lovell Avenue.

Work is still continuing, however. As the warmer weather arrives in the next few months, a close eye will be kept on the location to ensure that further problems do not occur. The meetings that have been held with various agencies have given the residents the knowledge to contact the correct agency should problems arise. The residents will also have set up their Neighbourhood Watch Scheme in the very near future which, along with their increased confidence in each of the agencies, will aid them in providing accurate and timely information in order that action can be taken.

The communication that has been encouraged throughout this project between all parties involved – the police, local agencies, residents and youths is set to continue. In order to prevent any further problems, this must be the priority. By working together, it will be possible to prevent a re-occurrence of these problems.

Contributors

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Councillor Mike Thomas

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—Estate Officer, Cadbury Heath Housing Office

Steve Bennett

—Repairs Inspector, Cadbury Heath Housing Office

David Morrison

—Community Spaces Manager

Paul Godwin

—Made for Ever youth centre leader

Suzanne Kenyon

— Area Facilitator

Detached Youth Workers

—Youth Support Unit