

# **The Tilley Award 2002**

## **Bleach Green An Estate on the Edge?**



**Northumbria Police:  
Gateshead West Command**

**Gateshead Council**



***0 Gateshead  
Council***

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## **THE TILLEY AWARD 2002**

### **BLEACH GREEN — AN ESTATE ON THE EDGE?**

#### **The Nature of the Problem Addressed**

The Bleach Green estate situated within the borough of Gateshead in the North East of England, experiences particularly high levels of social and economic deprivation. In 1999 public perceptions of problems included the level of crime and the supply and misuse of controlled drugs, together with criticism of the standards of upkeep on the estate and the services provided there.

#### **The Evidence Used to Define the Problem**

- Covert intelligence gathering by the police during 1997 found that
  - heroin was the drug of choice with over 80 young people dependent upon the drug
  - their drug habit was funded by acquisitive crime, especially dwelling house burglary
  - street dealing was commonplace
  - the young people displayed a significant lack of knowledge regarding drug misuse
  - local people were frightened to give information through fear of retribution
  - 'traditional' policing methods of surveillance and intelligence gathering were not viable due to the physical design of the built environment
- analysis of public consultation undertaken during 1999 found that the majority of respondents described levels of crime and drug misuse as 'extremely high' or 'fairly high' within the estate
- analysis of data owned by the council found that in 1999 there was a tenancy turnover rate of 35%, with a further 22% registered for a transfer
- analysis of recorded crime data found that the dwelling house burglary rate was more than three times the national average for the period 1997 - 2000

#### **The Response to the Problem**

The core aim of the response was to target crime prevention efforts into this high crime neighbourhood and apply comprehensive community initiatives to tackle the causes. The methodology undertaken comprised of a 'crackdown and containment' approach of short, medium and long term strategies:

- Operation Avalanche – a six month covert police operation, with the council as an active partner, which resulted in the arrest of 28 persons and significant custodial sentences
- Home Office Burglary Reduction Initiative which incorporated:
  - community empowerment
  - Operation Iceberg -- a council-managed community based crime prevention initiative
  - target hardening and environmental improvements
  - proactive and reactive policing in partnership
  - diversionary strategies

#### The Impact of the Response and its Measurement

Analysis of primary and secondary quantitative and qualitative data found that there was a reduction in dwelling house burglary of over 50%, 28 persons were convicted of drug and firearm offences and 47% of residents surveyed said that there had been an improvement within the estate. Significantly it was also found that there had been improved and meaningful partnership communication and working.

## **BLEACH GREEN — AN ESTATE ON THE EDGE?**

### **BLEACH GREEN — THE SOCIO-ECONOMIC CONTEXT**

The Bleach Green estate is situated within the Blaydon Ward of the metropolitan borough of Gateshead in the North East of England. It is a residential estate comprising of 795 two and three bedroom houses, 91% of which are council owned. Appendix One displays a visual image of the estate. The population of the estate is approximately 2250 with an ethnic minority population of less than 1% (Gateshead Council, Performance Management Information, 1999/2000). The Sure Start Blaydon Winlaton Outline Proposal (2000) established that the estate experiences particularly high levels of social and economic deprivation, with an unemployment rate of 23.5% (Borough average: 12.6%); 33.4% of the population are lone parents with dependent children and 71% of households have no car. The Blaydon ward ranks 1218 on the Government's National Index of Deprivation, 0001 being the most deprived. Appendix Two shows the geographical location of the Blaydon Ward within Gateshead. Spread geographically on a steep hill the area suffers poor transport links and a general isolation from mainstream health services. Not surprisingly, Bleach Green was recognised as suffering some of the worst problems in the borough. Significantly the estate had not been subject to any form of action or initiatives designed to combat these problems.

### **BLEACH GREEN — THE CRIME AND DISORDER CONTEXT**

Operation Ulysses, undertaken during 1997, enabled a covert police officer to gather information and intelligence regarding the perceived problem and linkages between drugs and crime on the Bleach Green estate. The methodology included experiencing 'estate life' at first hand and engaging in dialogue with the local community. It was found that:

- Heroin was the drug of choice for many young people. In excess of eighty young people were known to be dependent upon the drug, funding their habits with acquisitive crime.
- House burglary and shoplifting were the favoured crimes.

- Many of the young people displayed a lack of knowledge regarding the use of heroin, believing that it was not addictive if smoked. Many were not introduced to the drug by the gate of 'softer' drugs, but were using heroin as their own gateway to addiction.
- Street dealing was commonplace, but residents were too fearful of reprisals to give information to the police and the council. Many of the families involved in the problems of drugs and crime were connected and/or related and were a powerful section of the community.
- The physical design of the estate was not conducive to the 'traditional' policing methodology of surveillance and observation.

## THE FIRST RESPONSE – THE COLLATION OF FURTHER INTELLIGENCE AND ITS ANALYSIS

Following this initial phase of information gathering and analysis an interim 'response' was implemented which encompassed a number of interventions. These interventions were to primarily continue with the process of intelligence gathering and analysis. First, the local school was consulted and teachers provided with information on drug culture, signs and symptoms. In addition two-way dialogue was encouraged to help identify problem individuals. Second, community meetings were held regarding substance misuse and were well received by the public. Third, peer counsellors were launched by the local youth club in order that young people could receive information to enable them to support their friends who were at risk. Fourth, detached youth work was undertaken and young people provided with accurate information regarding substance misuse. Whilst the interventions provided further intelligence and information, especially regarding the prevalence of substance misuse amongst young people, the issues of drugs, crime and deprivation continued to dominate the Bleach Green estate.

During April and May 1999 Gateshead Council, together with an independent housing consultancy, Banks of the Wear, conducted an audit on Bleach Green with the intention of preparing an action plan for the estate. The audit, which involved a door to door survey, identified public perceptions of problems that included the level of crime and the supply and misuse of controlled drugs. Levels of crime (burglary, assault and vandalism) were described as 'extremely high' or 'fairly high' by 69% of respondents. Levels of drug misuse were described as 'extremely' or 'fairly high' by 66% of respondents. There was

also criticism of the standards of upkeep on the estate and of the services provided there (Options Study, 1999). The Study also identified areas where the residents of the estate would value improvements. Measures to improve security were seen to be of great value by 74% of respondents, whilst 70% placed the same importance on more visible policing. A Neighbourhood Watch scheme was a high priority for 55% of the respondents and improved contact with the police by 53%. Analysis of data held by the council at this time found that there was also a high turnover of tenancies (35%), and a further 22% of tenants were registered for a transfer.

Further scanning and analysis was undertaken regarding the serious concerns about the levels of crime on the estate and the disproportionate amount of officer time spent on Bleach Green. Analysis of the police crime recording system found that between November 1996 and October 1999 there had been 246 dwelling house burglaries — equating to an annual rate of 67 dwellings per 1000 (Reducing Burglary Initiative Bid, 1999). The National average at that time was 27 per 1000 dwellings. Analysis of these burglaries showed that:

*Victim:* 40% were reported by male victims whose average age was 33 years, 52.4% of whom were unemployed. 56% were reported by female victims whose average age was 36 years, 66.3% of whom were unemployed. Main types of property stolen included electrical goods, jewellery, benefit books and cash.

*Location:* In 97% of reported burglaries the point of entry was on the ground floor. The majority of the entry points were at the side or rear of the property giving access to the kitchen. A common methodology was to stand on the 'wheelie' bin to access rear transom windows, remove the putty from the window to then facilitate removal of the windowpane.

*Offender.* During the three years studied only 14 burglary dwellings on the estate were detected. This was indicative of the frequency with which witnesses on the estate came forward with information to identify the offenders. Despite the small sample size an analysis of those responsible for the detected burglaries showed some clear characteristics of the offenders. A total of 16 offenders were identified. Of these all were male, 15 resided on the estate and all bar one were aged between 16 and 29 years. Crucially 12 of

the offenders had at least one previous conviction for drug offences. The profile of the Bleach Green burglar emerged as male, aged less than 30 years, resident on the estate, and with a history of involvement in drugs.

## THE SECOND RESPONSE – OPERATION AVALANCHE

The issue regarding drug supply, particularly heroin and cocaine, was obviously a concern for the local police, Gateshead Council and residents. 'Conventional' policing methods, of forced entry on target households in the search for controlled drugs, had failed to yield results in that only very small quantities of drugs were found. An alternative method of investigation was therefore deployed and, in September 1999, following a six-month covert police operation, Operation Avalanche took place:

*Police raids which centred on Bleach Green, Blaydon, Gateshead, over three days led to the recovery of half a kilo of rock heroin, worth up to £200, 000, and more than 19 arrests in connection with conspiracy to supply heroin and cocaine.*

Hickman, 1999

It is of worth to note that the undercover operation, involving police officers residing on the estate for a period of six months, was successful due to the involvement of the council. An officer created a false housing application for the two officers that enabled them to be allocated a tenancy on the estate. The officer then monitored the operation in partnership with Northumbria Police to ensure that the process ran smoothly. The police officers established themselves in a council house on Bleach Green, becoming part and parcel of community life. Slowly integrating themselves into the drug sub-culture, they amassed the evidence required for successful prosecutions. A week prior to the Avalanche raids local partners were consulted and informed of the imminent activity. Once the raids had taken place, those with significant drug dependencies would be faced with a vacuum. Whilst the police would be the catalyst, it was recognised that there were other partners with the resources and, more significantly, the expertise to provide the health care and social support that would be required to lead to sustainable change on Bleach Green. Council officers accompanied the police on the raids to the premises in Bleach Green. The officers, who would partner the police for the next three years, worked

alongside to ensure that housing policy was robustly implemented. Their own legislation would ensure that appropriate action was taken in the prosecution of offenders.

The targeting of the suppliers was successful, leading to prison sentences ranging from three to ten years, but was a short-term measure for the residents of Bleach Green. There remained on the estate associates and relatives of the defendants, with an element of drug misuse leading to crime and anti-social behaviour. The development and implementation of a multi-agency strategic approach to this problem was therefore the crucial 'next step'.

### THE THIRD RESPONSE – THE BLEACH GREEN REDUCING BURGLARY INITIATIVE

At the end of 1999, Gateshead West Area Command and Gateshead Council successfully applied for Home Office Reducing Burglary Initiative funding of £24,000 in order to begin its medium and long-term response to the problems. The proposed interventions included:

#### *Community Empowerment*

This intervention sought to restore links between the police and the community by giving support to the Residents' Association, rejuvenating and extending the Neighbourhood Watch scheme, and by providing an effective witness support scheme. Planning took place with a view to establishing a network of effective Neighbourhood Watch schemes on Bleach Green. Meetings with the residents, with the involvement of the Residents' Association, were held with a view to commencing as soon as possible. Community groups were encouraged to identify local initiatives that would impact on the number of burglaries and were able to bid for funding from a 'Challenge Fund' established to support this initiative. An effective witness support scheme was established to give witnesses the confidence to testify against offenders. It was modelled on successful schemes elsewhere, tailored to meet the specific needs of Bleach Green and involved the provision of mobile telephones, pagers, personal alarms, and publicity.



## *Operation Iceberg*

The council has in place a Neighbourhood Relations Team whose objectives are to reduce crime, the fear of crime and anti-social behaviour within residential communities, irrespective of tenure, using a multi-agency approach. The Team enforce the councils Tenancy Agreement, the rules and regulations that council tenants must abide by, and other civil remedies, such as injunctive proceedings and Anti-Social Behaviour Orders. At the Teams inception in 1994 the policy emphasis was one of strict enforcement. However the present policy and practice is one of trying to effect behavioural change, with enforcement as a last resort. The Team is located within the Community Safety department works with all communities, not just those in municipal accommodations. The Team reacts to complaints from communities and other agencies throughout the Borough and in working practice engage in a problem-solving partnership framework. Key partners include Northumbria Police, National Probation Service, Youth Offending Team, other functions of the council such as Social Services, and the Gateshead and South Tyneside Health Authority. The work of the Team clearly fits the national agenda of the 'joined up' crime reduction policy, aimed at local communities, many in high crime areas.

In response to Operation Avalanche a proposal was developed to enable the Team to more intensively and proactively target Bleach Green with a specific geographic focus, with intensive housing management and effective targeting of the perpetrators of criminality and disorder, within a multi-agency partnership framework. This combination of short-term and medium term actions can be termed a 'crackdown and containment' mode of approach (Tilley, 2001). On a daily basis the Team monitored the tenancies of those who were reported to be responsible for crime and disorder. Such reports can be received from a variety of sources, such as the local housing office, residents and the police. Perpetrators were to be visited, often in conjunction with the police, and warned of their conduct. In some circumstances civil action was to be taken against perpetrators who were in breach of the council's Tenancy Agreement, for example the illegal or immoral use of the premises, due to a criminal conviction for the supply of controlled drugs. It should be stressed however, as outlined above, that the Team would also provide support, advice and assistance to those persons, who were committing crime because of their involvement in substance misuse. To complement such activity the Team would 'vet' prospective tenants with the police to ensure that new tenants would not

contribute to the problems of crime and disorder (Northumbria Safer Estates Agreement, Information Exchange Protocol, 2000). Additional objectives included the removal of the visible signs of crime and decline, such as graffiti and the results of vandalism, and attempt to break down barriers within the local community to help restore confidence to local residents. These objectives were achieved by daily 'foot patrol' inspections of the estate, reporting and ensuring a swift response to those visible indicators. Such an approach indicated to residents that the local authority cared about the estate and community and provides a formal presence of social control (Wilson and Kelling, 1982). Such foot patrols also enabled the officers to engage daily with local residents, complimented by attending regular public meetings and Resident Association forums. Such dialogue also contributed to 'intelligence' that could be gathered regarding the conduct of individuals, and be of use to both the council and the police. Funding for the secondment to the estate of two full time Neighbourhood Relations Officers, for a period of six months, was obtained from the Northumbria Police Authority Grant Pool (Northumbria Police Grant Pool Application Form, 1999/2000). On the 1<sup>st</sup> of October 1999 Operation Iceberg commenced.

This initial intensive management package was deemed to be successful by the local community, council and police. In order to continue the project additional funding was secured from an approved Single Regeneration Budget (Tackling the Fear of Crime) bid together with an allocation from the Northumbria Police Burglary Reduction Initiative based on the estate.

With the continuation of the project a 24-hour answer phone was provided to allow information to be left confidentially and an office surgery was arranged on one afternoon each week, allowing residents to call in and make complaints or seek advice. Leaflets were delivered to every resident giving them contact numbers of agencies who could provide support and advice, thus reinforcing the agencies commitment to the estate (SRB Summary Report, 2000/2001). A further integral feature of the extension of the project was the contribution towards the funding of an estate 'handyperson' whose role involves carrying out general maintenance and repairs on the estate with the emphasis on cleaning up the visible image of the area. Examples include the removal of graffiti as soon as possible; repairing damaged and vandalised fencing; and ensuring that any other repairs or maintenance issues, such as broken windows, are passed onto the relevant agencies quickly, to avoid further deterioration within the estate. The handyperson is a pilot

Neighbourhood Warden, in this case aimed at tackling 'environmental' disorder (Social Exclusion Unit, 2000).

However, during the summer of 2000 a stock condition survey was carried out on the estate, which established that the majority of the housing stock was structurally unsound, and would require £6 million to rectify – a resource unavailable to the council. A survey of residents, together with a series of public meetings, was undertaken to establish their wishes as to the future of the estate. As a result of the responses a programme was drawn up, which will effectively result in the demolition of approximately 400 houses. Interestingly, 95% of respondents stated that they would want to stay with the council, and the majority would want to be housed locally (Gateshead Council, Report for the Executive, 21<sup>st</sup> November 2000).

Some demolition has commenced, however this has not resulted in the cessation of Operation Iceberg. The initiative has proved to be invaluable for a number of reasons. First, it is anticipated that the demolition will take at least two years so there is still a requirement to intensively manage the estate. Second, because of the knowledge that the council has of particular residents the sensitive relocation of a number of them has been possible, so as not to create 'clusters' of anti-social tenants on other estates. Third, the daily presence of the council officers has aided the security of the empty properties on the demolition site, traditionally the target of vandalism and theft. Operation Iceberg will therefore continue until the cessation of funding in March 2003.

#### *Target Hardening and Environmental Improvements*

With effect from March 2000 a representative of the local housing office and the local crime prevention officer visited the site of every burglary. The crime prevention officer identified the work required to effect repairs and other improvements to raise the security of the house to 'Secure by Design' standards and, if practicable, the Area Housing Manager arranged to have the work completed. In addition, police officers patrolling the estate would identify areas of poor design or maintenance that appeared to encourage crime. The local Community Beat Officers would communicate those suggestions to the Area Housing Manager who would assess the viability of carrying out remedial works. In June 1999 an initiative commenced, with the intention of visiting every house of Bleach Green and property mark 5 valuable items. The 'Selectamark' system was used, and

approximately 50% of the estate had been completed. Only one house where property marking had taken place had subsequently been burgled.

### *Proactive and Reactive Policing*

The detection rate for burglaries on Bleach Green was low and therefore a dedicated team of officers focused on domestic burglary. The Gateshead West Area Command Burglary Team comprised of six officers who were either appointed detective constables, or officers who had completed their crime skills training and were awaiting transfer to the CD. The team included a dedicated visits officer who visited all domestic burglaries to ensure that all lines of enquiry had been undertaken, forensic evidence had been considered, and the computerised crime recording system had been fully updated.

### *Diversionary Strategies*

This intervention was a series of strategies intended to divert young people from crime in general, and drug abuse in particular, and also to target the existing substance misusing criminal. First, users were supported by specialist drug and alcohol workers to reduce the number of burglaries that occurred as a result of dependency. Second, the Blaydon Bike Project provided equipment and training to repair bicycles, engaged in fund-raising to make the project self-sustaining and helped the young people develop a wide range of skills. Third, the Young People's Drop-in Advice Service was designed to be a peer education project with young people acting a first point of contact for others of their age, education staff and other professionals. Skill courses in Beauty Therapy and Hair Care helped young people address their own health and beauty needs as a diversion from substance misuse.

The Gateshead West Youth Issues Officer, during the initiative, delivered drugs education to all primary and secondary schools serving the Bleach Green area. Alongside diversionary work with young people, support sessions were offered to parents, teachers, and school governors. A Arrest Referral scheme was introduced to direct drug users resident on Bleach Green, when arrested for any offence, towards counselling.

## ASSESSING THE SUCCESS

There are 'major methodological and practical difficulties in evaluating the effectiveness of community based prevention programmes' (Hope, 1998) and this Project is no exception due to highly complex and multi-factorial nature of the programme. Notwithstanding this issue a number of sources of primary and secondary quantitative and qualitative data have been examined by police and council personnel in an attempt to establish the effectiveness of the programme. Space precludes an in-depth profile of assessment of the project, a snapshot is therefore provided.

First, recorded crime statistics were examined. On a quarterly basis since April 1998 thirty Home Office crime categories are available; crimes of particular interest to this initiative include total recorded crime and burglary (dwelling). In addition identical data is available, over the same time frame, for a 'buffer' estate, adjacent to Bleach Green, comparable in size and with the same social and demographic indices. Appendix Three displays this information in graphical form. Both the estates show a significant decrease in recorded crime in the quarter when Operation Avalanche took place. It would appear that this intensity of police action and the removal of a significant number of persons responsible for committing crime resulted in this reduction. Whilst not sustained to its lowest level a significant reduction in burglary dwelling has been achieved.

Qualitative data exists in the form of a number of attitudinal resident surveys. The Options Study of April 1999 has already been described. In the summer of 2000 the council conducted a further survey of Bleach Green residents. Its purpose was two-fold. First to establish if there had been any change in the residents attitude regarding the above concerns, and second to determine the future of the estate due to the structural problems of the houses. An 83% response rate was achieved – relating to 596 responses out of a possible 715, excluding the by now 127 empty houses. In answer to the question regarding crime and disorder, 47% of respondents stated that the problems had reduced. Reasons given included a greater council and police officer presence; the estate was quieter with less crime; there was a more stringent allocations policy; and the estate handyman had contributed to better repairs and the appearance of the estate. It would appear that the perceptions of the community had altered since the original survey, contributing to the context of the fear of crime and providing a reasonable test for the expected outcome of a reduction in that fear.

Qualitative data also exists in the form of previous monitoring and evaluation of the initiative, particularly Operation Iceberg. One area of external research was undertaken by the Government's Drug Prevention and Advisory Service in December 2000 for the publication *Tackling Drug Use in Rented Housing*. The research consisted of a two-day site visit and extensive informal interviews with council officers, at a strategic and operational level, partner agencies and members of the estates Residents Association. The guide views Operation Iceberg as a good example of how action to control entrenched drug supply can be a pre-requisite for longer-term estate change. It states (2001: 36) that there is 'real value in ensuring that police action to tackle drug markets...is linked firmly to broader estate wide action to tackle the spiral of decline and assist regeneration'. It is interesting to note that the views of the residents of Operation Iceberg were extremely positive, and they let it be known that the community refers to the council officers, who are both female, as the 'drug wifies'. Arguably these views support the notion of a reduction in the fear of crime and an increase in social control, gained via the physical and reassuring presence of the council officers on the estate.

## CONCLUSION

This paper has described how a long-term problem-solving multi-agency approach can achieve sustainable change to a community experiencing multiple issues of social exclusion and deprivation – including crime and drugs. Through partnership working the aim of reducing dwelling house burglaries and the supply of Class A drugs has been achieved. The partners are determined to continue to work with the residents of Bleach Green and improve the quality of life for that community.

APPENDIX ONE



Hawthorn Road, Bleach Green (1999)



**Bleach Green Environmental Improvements**



**Sycamore Road, Bleach Green**



## APPENDIX TWO

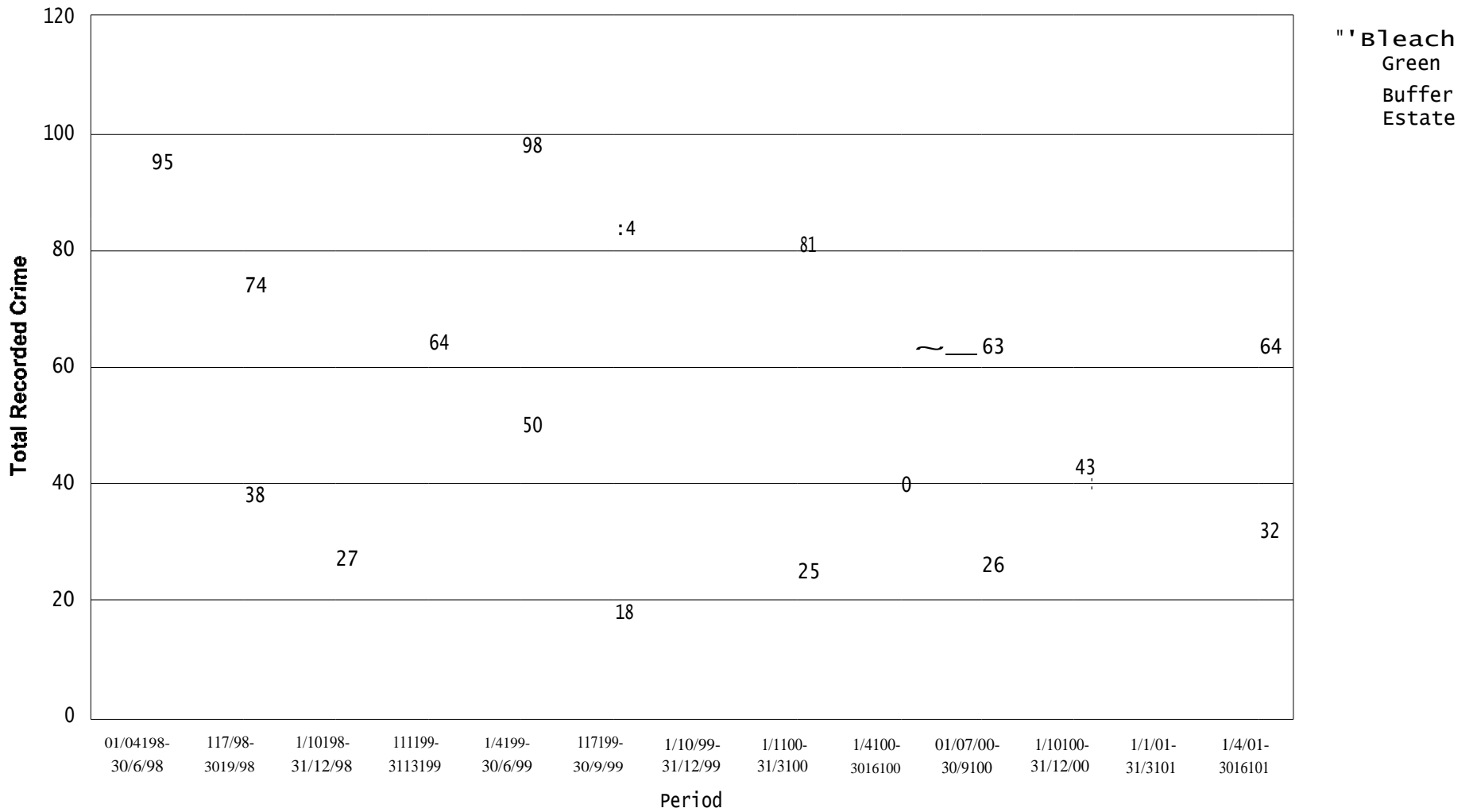
Blaydon **Ward**

### **Key to Wards**

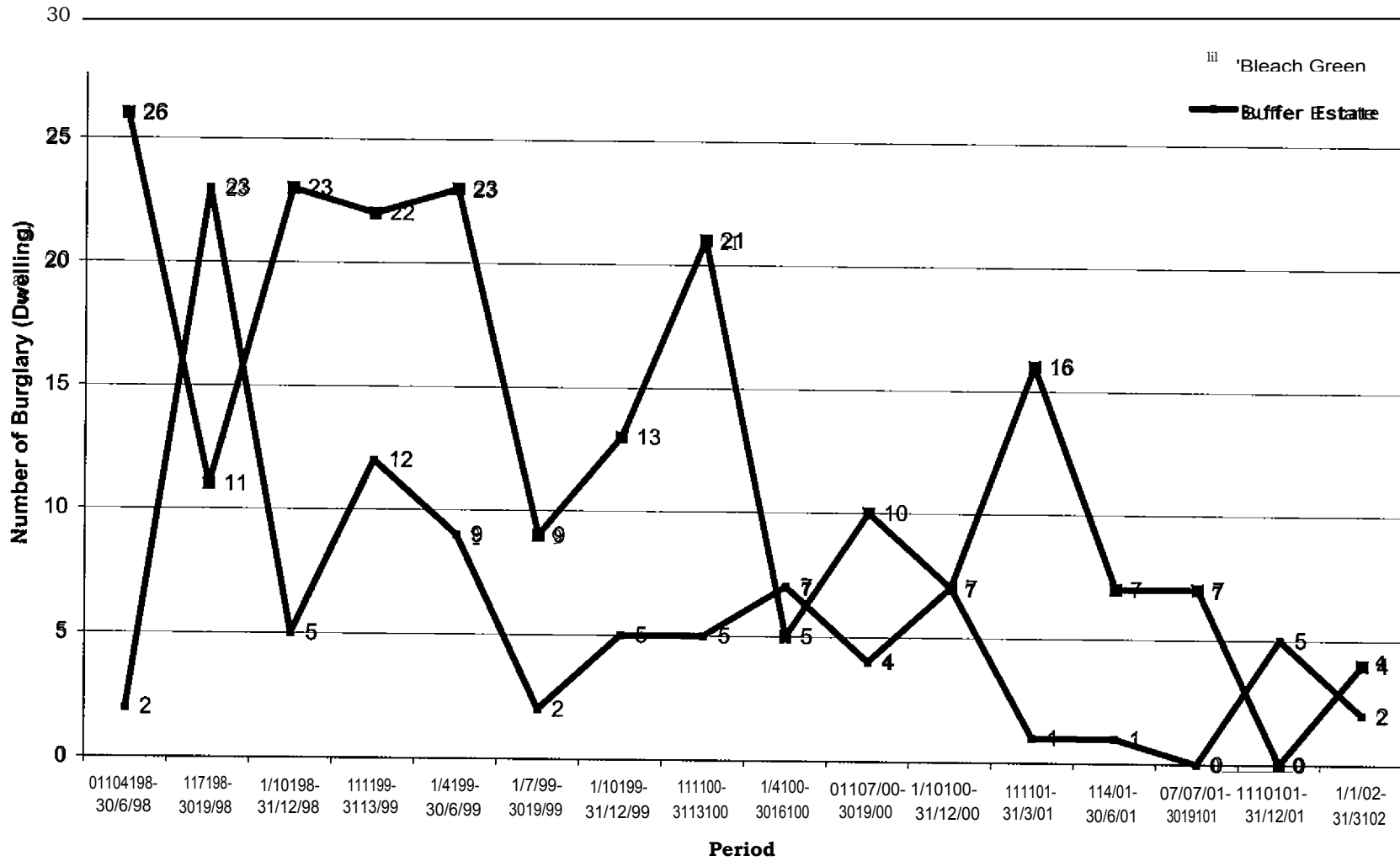
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| 2. Bensham                | 10. Telling         | 18. Teams          |
| 3. Bit-deg                | 11. High Tell       | 19. Whickemt North |
| 4. Marlon                 | 12. Larnedey        | 20. Whickham South |
| 5. Chopwel& Rowlands GM   | 13. Lam             | 21. Wanalton       |
| 6. Chow done              | 14. Low Tell        | 22. Wrekandy1ce    |
| 1. Craw cxoak & Greenside | 15. Fe1aw & Haworth |                    |
| 8. Beckham                | 16. Byion           |                    |

**Gateshead:  
Index of multiple deprivation.**

**Total Recorded Crime: Comparitive Figures for Bleach Green vs. Buffer Estate (11411998-301612001)**



**Burglary (Dwelling): Comparative Figures for Bleach Green and Buffer Estate (11411998-311312002)**



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