

FRYING TONIGHT IN PEACE

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SUMMARY

Situated within a shops complex on Pope Lane, Moor Nook "Chippy" is the only chip shop on the estate and the only premises open late into the evening. The shop therefore became a meeting place for the youth of the estate, as it was the only place providing heat, light and cover. The majority of the youths congregating outside the shop were already barred from the local youth club as a result of their behaviour.

Unfortunately, this antisocial behaviour by the youths continued outside the chip shop. Incidents of criminal damage and juvenile disorder increased in the area. The owner suffered minor damage to his premises and a drop in custom and takings due to the presence of the group who were perceived as a threat by residents.

The then Community Beat Manager, PC2639 Morgan, analysed the problem through consultation with the owner of the shop, local residents and the Council Housing office. In addition she identified the number, time and type of Police deployments to the shop, establishing peak times of activity and the identities of youths involved.

Following consultation with partners, high visibility patrols by 2639 and other officers commenced. The youths involved were taken home and spoken to in front of parents. Where appropriate, warnings in relation to breach of tenancy were issued by the local Council Housing office to persistent offenders and their parents. Local residents were encouraged to adopt a "zero tolerance" attitude toward the group and give witness statements for criminal activity.

By the methods employed the identified public nuisance and disorder problems were eradicated from that location. The number of Police deployments was reduced to nil and there was a marked reduction in the incidents of damage.

The shop owner had peace restored, and saw his profits double. The Council saw a reduction in repair costs for incidents of damage. The local residents confidence was increased, the chip shop was again a safe place to visit. The Police were seen to be providing a solution which worked and which the community had been involved in. The youths involved were dealt with in a positive manner and changed their behaviour to the good of all involved.

INTRODUCTION

I am PS2639 Christina Morgan of the Lancashire Constabulary, currently based at Chorley Police Station, Southern Division. At the time of conducting work regarding this submission, I was based at Fulwood Police Station, Central Division, where I worked as the Community Beat Officer for the Moor Nook Estate. The estate consists mostly of local authority housing with some being owner occupied. It is situated in the Ribblesdale area of Preston and has recently been classed as an area of high deprivation.

There is a very good community spirit on the estate and residents are fortunate to have a local community centre, which is run by trained Youth and Community Workers who organise all manner of clubs and activities. There are also several good community groups including a residents association and an estate management board, who work in conjunction with Preston Borough Council.

SCANNING

Residents and trades people of a local authority estate, namely Moor Nook, were regularly reporting on-going juvenile nuisance and disorder incidents. This was confirmed by incident logging, crime reports, geographic police patrols, Preston Borough Council housing officers, local councillors and various residents associations etc. The problems were centred around the local shops complex and culminated in nuisance/disorder and reported crime, namely, criminal damage, arson, robbery etc. The shops complex is situated on the main thoroughfare through the estate and consists of a post office/general store, chip shop, newsagent, bookmakers and the Preston Borough Council estate management board office. There are also some vacant premises, which are boarded up. The complex itself is central to the estate and is very badly dilapidated. It is clearly visible when entering the estate from any location.

The chip shop is open until midnight and in particular provided heat, light and an unofficial youth club during cold winter evenings for the local youths. The owner was initially in the habit of allowing the youths to sit in (on a window ledge). They invariably abused his hospitality and there was a considerable downturn in their behaviour.

There was a huge increase in juvenile disorder/criminal damage, both in and outside the shop. The antisocial behaviour of the youths further added to the decline of the area and in particular contributed to a spiral of decline at a complex of shops already in dire need of renovation. It should be noted that this problem was not inherent to the chip shop. The chip shop was merely a focal point for the youths who were actually causing all manner of mayhem in the immediate area.

The chip shop, being the only premises open late into the evening was the premises, most directly affected by the problems. This in turn led to a decrease in shop takings. Residents, some of whom are elderly, were greatly intimidated by the large group of between 10-15 youths who would loiter both in/outside the shop, blocking the entrance. Consequently, residents were reluctant to attend the shop and, for some of the elderly residents, the shop provided the only means of a daily hot meal. The owner reported seeing his passing trade customers driving by on seeing the group of youths. His takings were so low he was considering selling up. Residents were also concerned that owner-occupiers may see a decline in their property prices, as a direct result of the ongoing problems.

ANALYSIS/PAT

I continually monitored incident logs/crime reports and INTL and obtained further information regarding the incidents and the identity of those responsible, from the residents and shop owners. I was then able to establish specific times of peak activity, the extent and frequency of the actual nuisance and disorder and the nature of crimes being committed. Peak activity was usually during the evenings and Police were deployed to the area almost nightly during the winter months, sometimes up to three times per night.

I consulted with the owners of the chip shop, post office, the estate management board, the local housing manager, councillors and community groups. I involved them and enlisted their help and commitment to combat the antisocial behaviour. I organised regular meetings, attended by the councillors, housing manager and chairpersons of each community group, to discuss the problems in the area, swap/obtain information regarding offenders/incidents, in order to assist in the analysis of the problem and consider the way forward in solving it. All of these partners were instrumental in the analysis of this problem, as, without their valued information and contribution, I would not have obtained a truly accurate picture of the nature/extent of the disorder.

Location

Considering PAT, there was little I could do to change the actual location ie the shops complex, which as previously stated was badly run down. Preston Borough Council did not have the finances to redevelop the complex. As a result, they enlisted the assistance of other independent housing authorities with available funding for development schemes. Three authorities submitted/presented their proposals for redevelopment of the shops and after consultation with Preston Borough Council, the police and the relevant resident associations, Wyre Borough Council's proposals were accepted. They secured funding to completely refurbish the shops and build a quantity of elderly persons bungalows on the derelict land immediately behind the complex. A feasibility study had previously been conducted, in an attempt to ascertain the residents' views on what use they would like to see of the derelict land. A lack of accommodation for elderly residents was highlighted. Therefore, when redevelopment proposals were submitted, the bungalow option was the one most preferred. Building work will commence on the 28 May 2003.

Victim

The victims were shop owners, potential customers and residents who were mostly intimidated by the local youths. As a result, there was a distinct lack of information, as many incidents were not reported. In partnership with the residents and Preston Borough Council, I identified the victims, encouraged them to provide statements, and supported them at subsequent court cases. If victims/witnesses were reluctant to speak to police, they were encouraged by community newsletter items to report any incidents to the housing officer. In this way, I was able to obtain further information, which otherwise would never have been available. I also encouraged the chip shop owner to install CCTV, keep a log of the incidents occurring in and around the shop, and barr the main offenders from entering.

Offender

Eventually, the offenders were identified as local youths aged between 14 –17 years. Most were suspended from school or did not attend, were already barred from the local youth club and had little or no parental guidance. Analysis of the problem revealed the underlying causes of offender behaviour to be, peer pressure and lack of recreational facilities for older children. To a certain extent acceptance of their behaviour by the residents, due to fear of reprisals and offender knowledge that victims would be reluctant to provide statements, led to their increased confidence. They then resorted to the following criminal activity in the vicinity of the shops; theft, criminal damage, arson, robbery, harassment, assault, causing traffic accidents. It was therefore apparent that this was not just a juvenile nuisance; the youths were actually committing some serious offences. If I could manage to obtain statements, the youths could then be dealt with appropriately and effectively.

I was very mindful of the cyclical effect of the problem ie, younger children observing the antisocial behaviour of their peers and considering it normal.

OBJECTIVES

The most appropriate people were involved in identifying the problem, namely local geographic officers, residents/residents associations, local trades people, Preston Borough Council, local councillors, and local housing officers.

It was reasonable for this problem to be prioritised over others, as it had the greatest impact on quality of life issues. It was therefore my objective to:

1. Work in partnership with the local community/councillors.
2. Restore order/reduce crime
3. Increase public satisfaction/confidence
4. Reduce complaints

Hopefully, my success criteria would later be measured by complete eradication of nuisance and disorder, reduction in complaints, and increased public satisfaction/confidence. I chose the following responses in order to address these issues.

RESPONSE

1. High visibility policing was conducted mostly by myself. I requested response patrols to pay passing attention and obtain names/addresses of loitering youths. Likewise if they were deployed to a specific incident. I did however take ownership of the problem with the assistance of the community and did so to avoid a constant drain on response patrols.
2. I then conducted home visits to youths/parents, to highlight the problem, enlist their support, inform them of the Harassment Act and remind them of their tenancy agreements. A letter reiterating these points followed up each visit.

3. I passed this information onto the housing manager who also sent letters to offenders' parents, again outlining the terms of tenancy agreements.
4. Preston Borough Council employed professional witnesses to assist in gathering evidence, but this was minimal, as finances were not available.
5. I then set about identifying witnesses/victims, either by word of mouth or by interrogating incident logs. I encouraged them to provide statements to enable offenders to be arrested.

The latter proved very difficult, as the residents were just highly intimidated and fearful of repercussions. It therefore proved a challenge to encourage people to supply statements and attend court. I was successful because I had gained residents' trust and proved that I was willing to try to improve the situation. Their perception of suffering repercussions was far greater than actual reality. This was later proved following arrests. If victims/witnesses made a stance against the youths, they invariably backed off.

There was also an attitude of acceptance. Residents/shop owners accepted the problems as a way of life, it was normal! What could the police do? From the information gained from my analysis, and the fact that the problem had been long/on-going, I decided that a zero tolerant approach would be the best possible course of action and would have the greatest impact. Merely moving the youths on, as in the past, would neither be sustainable or successful.

Consequently, as a result of a zero tolerance stance and eventual assistance from victims, witnesses and partnerships, I did manage to secure several arrests and convictions as follows:

1. Three youths climbed onto the rear roof of the shops and proceeded to throw large bricks at the chimney pots, in competition to see who could knock one down. Some bricks were launched right over the roof, landing on the pavement directly outside the chip shop. The youths did not consider the gravity of their actions ie persons could have been injured. All three were arrested for attempt damage, charged and convicted.
2. Five youths were arrested for robbery after ambushing another group of youths from outside the area who were visiting a friend on the estate, and had attended the chip shop. The aggrieved was attacked, pulled to the floor and frisked. His jacket was dragged off him and was stolen along with his mobile telephone. I obtained victim/witness statements and with the assistance of chip shop staff I managed to identify offenders. Unfortunately, because the aggrieved could not directly identify the offenders, it was a job destined for identification parade. The aggrieved was so frightened at the thought of having to face his attackers; he decided to retract his complaint. All five offenders were released no charge.
3. Three youths were arrested for criminal damage after ripping off roof tiles from the chip shop and neighbouring premises, and smashing them to the ground. £200 worth of damage was caused and all three offenders were arrested and subsequently convicted.

4. After a night consuming alcohol outside the chip shop. Youths went to the rear of the post office situated next door and gained entry to the back yard by damaging a secure gate. They then pushed a wheelie bin up against the rear of the premises and set light to it. The bin had been positioned up against a storeroom door. Behind this was a staircase leading to the upper flat where the owners resided. The storeroom was filled with paper products. Once alight, the fire was further encouraged by alcohol. The owners were alerted to the fire by what sounded like an explosion, they looked out of the upper window to see a youth fuelling the fire with liquid from an alcohol bottle. Two youths were arrested. One was released due to lack of evidence. The second was charged and convicted of arson. He was home office tagged as an alternative to a custodial sentence.
5. When restoration of the shops was uncertain, the residents were disappointed and obviously concerned about the state of the shops. They hired the services of a local artist using £500 obtained through charity. Her remit was to design artwork which children could replicate into templates, which they could then use to spray the tinnings on the shops, both vacant and occupied. It took the children and youth workers six weeks to make the templates in the youth club. They then went to the shops on a practice run and sprayed some templates. At the time of the spraying, youths were hanging about causing problems for the youth workers. By the next day the artwork had been daubed with graffiti. The children were devastated. Luckily, I manage to obtain statements from residents who had witnessed the offence. One youth was arrested for criminal damage and subsequently convicted. The court considered costs of almost £1,000.

At the same time as committing the above offences, the youths were also committing the following offences which, due to lack of evidence they were never detained for:

6. Setting light to litter bins outside the shops.
7. Reaching over the chip shop counter and stealing sausages and pies.
8. Picking tiles off the window ledge inside the chip shop and cracking them.
9. Continually cracking plate glass windows at both the chip shop and the post office.
10. Bricking passing cars and buses, causing damage and injury.
11. Putting ropes across the main carriageway outside the shops causing a road traffic accident.

The above offences serve as an insight into the activities of the youths and exactly what the residents and shop owners had to contend with.

It should be noted that no cost was incurred in responding to this problem. All efforts to resolve the nuisance/disorder were conducted during my daily duty as Community Beat Manager on the estate. Preston Borough Council did incur minimal costs for the engagement of professional witnesses.

ASSESSMENT

The youths quickly realised that I was working in partnership with residents etc as I was obtaining information about their activities even when I was off duty. They eventually got the message that we were not to be deterred. That we were on a mission to increase the quality of life of the residents and restore order. The youths also realised that residents and shop owners were now willing to provide statements and attend court. As a result:

1. The number of incidents reduced as follows:

From October 1999 to May 2000 (3/4 of year) – there were 171 calls to the area, 51 relating to the chip shop.

From June 2000 to May 2001 – there were 89 calls to the area, 26 relating to the chip shop

From June 2001 to May 2002 – there were 26 calls to the area, 8 relating to the chip shop.

With reference to the latter figures ie the 8 calls relating to the chip shop, some of these were relevant to firework nuisance, which was prevalent in all Preston areas.

I have interrogated incident logging from 1 June 2002 to 30 April 2003 and there were only 5 reports of damage/disorder for the area.

2. As a result, the number of police deployments also reduced with the decrease in complaints.
3. This also led to a reduction in repair costs for the shop owners and Preston Borough Council.
4. As a result of arrests and warnings, I managed to secure an Acceptable Behavioural Contract (ABC) on one youth. Preston Borough Council are now using ABC's as the first step towards Antisocial Behavioural Orders, which are both costly and time consuming to obtain. The ABC was issued with a warning that failure to abide by the conditions therein, would result in a Notice Seeking Possession (NSP) of the resident's property being served. Initially conditions imposed applied to the Moor Nook estate and were successful. However, the relevant youth then offended in another area. The conditions were extended to cover offences committed throughout the whole of the Preston area and an NSP was served. This ABC is regularly reviewed. A second NSP was served on the parents of another offending youth, without a previous ABC being imposed.

ASSESSMENT Continued

5. The chip shop owner reported an increase in takings. Initially, because of the problems and the subsequent decrease in his takings, he was considering selling up rather than securing a tenancy in the new shop complex. Since the problems have diminished, the shop takings have doubled and the owner has decided not to sell. The increase in business has afforded him a second shop in another area. He was so grateful for our efforts he sent a letter to the Chief Superintendent, expressing his gratitude.
6. There has been an increase in public satisfaction/confidence. The chip shop is now a safe place to visit, especially for the elderly. Residents have also expressed their gratitude.
7. I have received favourable comments from response officers who are very busy and appreciate not having to be constantly deployed to the area.

SUSTAINABILITY/POLICE WITHDRAWAL

The area had no beat officer from mid January of 2002 throughout the whole of that year, as I was conducting other duties, within Central Division. However, during that time I still maintained contact with community groups, residents and shop owners, who reported that there were no problems. I also had occasion to drive through the area and there were no youths loitering outside the chip shop.

In December of 2002, I was transferred to Southern Division, and the estate continued to be without a beat officer. As aforementioned, I have further interrogated incident logging from 1 June 2002 to 30 April 2003 and only five complaints have been reported. This is excellent evidence of sustainability.

Hopefully the area will continue to be almost problem free, and we have contributed to breaking the cyclical effect. Younger children are now aware of the numerous arrests and how like behaviour will be dealt with.

As I had obtained the first Acceptable Behavioural Contract imposed in the Preston area, procedures are now in place for further ABC's to be obtained and imposed in any area of Preston.

EXIT STRATEGY

My exit strategy whilst still working in Central Division was:

1. To continue to work in partnership with the local authority and residents, in particular to encourage redevelopment of the shops complex, which now appears imminent.
2. To strive to incorporate crime prevention through the environmental design principle to ensure that there is no reoccurrence of the problem.