Title of the project: Operation Blight

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Summary of application:

Scanning

Operation Blight is the Central Safer Neighbourhood Team's response to increased levels of graffiti in the Barnsley electoral wards of Darton East, Darton West and Dodworth.

Criminal damage was highlighted by local people as a particular problem. It also featured prominently the CDRPs Joint Strategic Intelligence Assessment and was high on partner's agendas, including none statutory agencies such as transport providers.

The location was chosen due to the high proportion of damage as an overall percentage of crime in the area, almost 30% of crime being criminal damage.

The scanning process revealed a gap in our knowledge about offenders, which required an innovative approach to address. In addition to identifying offenders Blight uses 'science' to address the offending behaviour of people engaged in criminal damage, particularly graffiti.

Analysis

With colleagues from Sheffield University we reviewed the academic literature on graffiti to better understand the causes and the characteristics of graffiti offending.

We then analysed the data and combined it with theory to better understand the nature of the problem we faced.

Using the analysis and situational crime prevention theory we were able to identify innovative responses likely to impact on the offending behaviour of the young offenders.

Responses

In addition to a range of traditional responses incorporating partner agencies and local residents the project team tried innovative approaches, for example, the use of 'fear of being caught' as a mechanism for preventing re offending.

Interestingly, and quite unexpectedly, the poster campaign aimed at appealing for information, had the unintended effect of shaming some of the young offenders, which in turn may have helped prevent their re offending.

Assessment

The project team recognised the value of a conventional evaluation seeking to show any relationship between their responses and any subsequent drop (or increase) in the crime type being targeted. This forms part of the assessment along with tracking the young people's offending behaviour nearly two years after the start of the project.

However, we were also interested in identifying if any of the mechanisms used had had any effect on the offending behaviour of the young people.

Sheffield University assisted with that aspect of the evaluation and found that the type and level of social capital exhibited by a young person can influence which mechanism, for example fear of being caught or shame, works best to suppress their offending behaviour.

Words: **390**

Description of project:

<u>Operation Blight</u>

<u>Scanning</u>

Why graffiti?

Criminal damage is a policing priority across England and Wales – due mainly to the adverse effect it has on neighbourhoods and, as a signal crime, the disproportionate level of fear it engenders. Damage can also act as a signal to communities that police are unable to tackle even the most minor offences, therefore impacting negatively on confidence in the police service and the criminal justice system as a whole.

Damage was a priority for the District, but also a major concern for the local community. The public Crime and Safety Sub-Groups cited damage, especially graffiti, as a major issue within the community, echoed and reinforced by the local elected members.

Location

The decision was made to run the project in the wards of Darton East, Darton West and Dodworth.

This was due in part to the high levels of criminal damage the area was experiencing as a proportion of overall crime. Almost 30% of the total amount of crime in the area was damage, which was 8% higher than anywhere else in the borough. Residents and elected members alike were identifying damage as a major concern, with public meetings, e.g. Local Area Forums, becoming platforms for discontent in the target area and words like 'covered' and 'everywhere' regularly being used to describe the extend of damage and graffiti.

Operation Blight commissioned an environmental audit of the area by the Local Authority Impact Wardens, which showed the true extent of the problem. It also showed that almost 60% of the damage caused in the area went unreported to any of the agencies.

Within the wards there are three towns: Darton, Mapplewell and Kexbrough and unsurprisingly they experienced the highest concentration of damage. The geography of the towns was ideal for the project as each was isolated from other areas by major roads and large open spaces. Displacement, therefore was less likely.

Another reason for choosing the area was the healthy relationship the SNT enjoyed with local elected members, politically advantageous, and the strong well-established residents' groups in two of the three areas. The third area, Kexbrough, was in the process of establishing a resident's committee, due in part to the high levels of damage in their area. These were important to the project team in terms of reassurance.

The final reason the area was chosen was the schools. The project aimed to build education into the process and the area was served by one large Secondary school, attended by the majority of the young people in the area. This would make reaching young people from the whole area much easier.

Victims

Both the recorded crime statistics and the environmental audit showed that almost all graffiti damage was caused to public buildings and in public spaces, such as telephone boxes, telephone exchange boxes ('telewest' boxes) and bus shelters.

Some local businesses were also attacked but almost no private or council dwellings were damaged.

Gathering information

As part of the scanning process the following organisations and agencies were involved and provided information about the type and the extent of criminal damage, particularly graffiti:

- SYP Crime Management System (CMS) – Provided information on crimes within the previous 6 months. Free text fields also provided valuable information.
- SYP Control and Deployment data – Provided details of reported incidents of damage, some of which had not been recorded as a crime. Incidents were also scanned for youth nuisance occurring close to reported offences of damage.
- SYP OIS (Operational Intelligence System) – System was scanned for intelligence re: possible suspects.
- Berneslai Homes - Housing system scanned for instances of damage reported by tenants, which may not have been reported to the police.
- Stagecoach damage reports – Stagecoach is the main bus operator in Barnsley. Their system was checked for reported damage to buses
- South Yorkshire Passenger Transport Executive (SYPTE) – Regularly provide SYP with information about damage to their street furniture. Keen to get involved due to cost of removing graffiti from bus shelters. Provided information identifying 'red routes' of damage in the target area.
- Neighbourhood Pride database – Neighbourhood Pride is the agency that cleans graffiti on behalf of the local authority – Their system was checked to provide information that supported the environmental audit.
- Environmental Audit by Impact Wardens – Impact Wardens from the local authority walked the townships of Darton, Mapplewell and Kexbrough and recorded and digitally photographed each instance of graffiti found. Several of the photographs were later used in the poster campaign (see images 1,2,3 and 4 post)
- Central SNT 'Goldenline' calls – SNT hotline for people to leave information about crime and ASB in their area.
- Local Elected Members and residents were visited by PCSOs. Information received fed into the system either through National Intelligence Reports.
- Crime and Safety Sub-Groups - These groups are the formal interface between the public and the SNTs.

Analysis

Analysis of the data told us a great deal about the location of graffiti and what it looked like. What we lacked was a good understanding of the underlying causes of graffiti – why do people do it and how might we stop them?

Local people not only wanted the graffiti stopping but they didn't want re-occurrences in the future and so four aims were developed for the project:

i) **identify and arrest the offenders**
ii) **reduce the chance of them re-offending**

In addition, there were two longer-term aims, which were more broadly targeted:

iii) **prevent young people with no previous graffiti experience from taking it up**
iv) **reassure the community that action was being taken.**

With colleagues from the University of Sheffield, we reviewed the academic research literature on graffiti to better understand the causes and characteristics of graffiti offending.

This was extremely important because it enabled us to build a more accurate picture of the problem. By combining the theory and evidence with our own data, we were able to better understand the nature of the problem we were experiencing and design our response strategy accordingly.

Our analysis focussed on the three sides of the problem triangle: **offender, target/victim and location:**

1. OFFENDER

Our analysis of the academic research literature told us the following:

Graffiti can be produced by individuals working alone or by groups.

There are three main group types: political dissidents, gangs and the graffiti subculture. **Political graffiti** occurs

because it is an anonymous (and safe) forum to express political views. **Gangs** use graffiti to mark their territory or challenge and show disrespect to a rival gang. Graffiti produced by a **graffiti subculture** is usually produced for its own sake, rather than for deeper rooted reasons.

Who are the offenders?

Evidence has consistently shown that the graffiti subculture is made up of predominately male teenagers. There is no clear link between graffiti and other offending. Where gangs are involved, it is likely that the offenders will have colourful criminal careers. However, where individuals are acting alone or within a subculture, they tend to be otherwise 'law-abiding'.

Offenders can write three types of graffiti: Tags, Throw-ups or Pieces.

Tags are single-lined writings that display the writer's name. Graffiti writers carry out a ritual called 'bombing' whereby they tag as many public places as possible. Tags are the most effective way to 'bomb' due to the speed at which they can be written.

Throw-ups are the stage beyond tags. Throw-ups are two-dimensional compositions usually painted with one or two colours. Those painting throw-ups aim to impress with visibility, quantity and adherence to the hip-hop style.

Pieces are large murals performed by the most experienced and skilful graffiti writers. These pieces are motivated more by artistic expression and style than tags or throw-ups.

What makes offenders stop?

As with all career paths the graffiti vocation comes to an end. There are a number of reasons why graffiti writers slow down with age including: achieving the fame they desire; getting jobs and no longer being able to commit as much time to graffiti; having extra responsibilities such as families; growing out of it; or turning to legal graffiti.

Combining the theory with the data

We were then able to analyse our own data and draw conclusions about the types of offender and the forms of graffiti we were dealing with:

Type of graffiti:

- None of the graffiti could be classed as artistic
- None of the graffiti showed any characteristics of being a 'gang tag' – therefore it appeared that the young people were working alone.
- The graffiti was not marking territory – therefore we assumed all the offenders lived locally.
- Very little graffiti was done on private houses – the majority was on walls, shops, bus shelters, 'telewest' boxes public buildings and telephone kiosks.
- Some tags appeared much more frequently than others and they became the initial priority.

Offenders:

- The few names put forward as suspects were not known to the police.
- Offenders were unlikely to be carrying bags or have trouble concealing the implements as the majority of the graffiti was caused by either marker pen or single colour spray paint.
- We estimated offenders were taking less than 15 seconds for each tag, therefore the chance of catching them red-handed was slim.

This was borne out by the low sanction detection rates for criminal damage, prior to Operation Blight.

Table 1 Sanction detection rates for criminal damage in the three years before Operation Blight, showing that before the project offenders were less likely to be caught in the target area than elsewhere in Barnsley

Area	Jan 04/05	Jan 05/06	Jan 06/07
Darton and Dodworth	12.8%	11%	11.9%
Barnsley Average	13.3%	13.4%	12.4%
South Yorkshire Police average	9.6%	9.8%	11.1%

2. LOCATION

From the academic research we knew that the particular location writers choose for their graffiti is decided by their motivation and the type of graffiti they are writing.

Offenders often choose locations
- that are the most visible
- already targeted by graffiti
- from which they can easily escape from the police.
- Indiscriminately as their sole aim is to tag in as many locations as possible ('bombing').

Combining the theory with the data

Analysis of our data revealed the following about the **location**:

- From 2005 the area saw a massive increase in recorded damage and although the introduction of the National Crime Recording Standards (NCRS) may be partly responsible, the table below shows that the wards of Darton and Dodworth suffered disproportionate increases of over 52% in two years that indicated additional reasons.

Table 2 – Increases in damage prior to Blight

Area	Jan 05/06	Jan 06/07
Darton and Dodworth wards	41%	11.4%
Barnsley Average	16.8%	7.1%
South Yorkshire Police Average	19.2%	-0.2%

- Graffiti was widespread and so 'hotspots' didn't show through traditional crime analysis. **The environmental audit, however showed the main targets to be specific objects at 'locations' rather than the locations per se**. Including:

  - the green 'telewest' exchange boxes located at the side of the main roads
  - road signs on the main routes through the townships
  - secluded locations under bridges
  - alleyways.

We concluded that different locations were being targeted for different reasons; secluded locations were selected to avoid detection, but prominent locations were selected for their 'display' properties.

3. VICTIMS

Although there was very little in the graffiti literature on the victims, we were able to draw on our knowledge of signal crimes to examine the victim perspective. We know that although the victims of graffiti may be said to be 'indirect', the impact of graffiti as a 'signal' of crime and disorder is arguably very real and serious.

Analysis revealed the following about the **victims**:

- Older residents thought that crime was much higher than actual levels as a result of seeing graffiti on a daily

basis, hence reassurance was important.

- Residents felt victimised by the graffiti despite few of them being direct victims
- People appeared unwilling to challenge the behaviour or come forward with information to assist the police in detecting the offences.
- Property targeted included public buildings and street furniture

By combining the information gathered at the scanning stage with the existing knowledge base on graffiti offending, we were able to build a much more accurate picture of the problem we were dealing with. This meant our responses could be better tailored to address the problem in both the short and long term.

Responses

The first objective of Operation Blight was to **identify and arrest offenders**. Our main problem was that we didn't know who the offenders were so we had to find ways of encouraging members of the public to come forward.

A poster campaign was devised, together with an awareness raising strategy across the affected estates.

Poster campaign

The posters, designed to be attractive and eye catching to young people, were carefully worded and the images chosen to reflect that these crimes were crimes against the community. The posters posed the question: **'Do you care about your community?'** (implication being if you did you ought to do something about it).

A reward for information of up to £1,000 was offered wording was designed to ease the conscience of any potential informant.

The campaign was originally a partnership venture between Barnsley Metropolitan Borough Council (BMBC) and the SNT. However, as the posters were being designed a national 'damage' campaign was launched by Crimestoppers. The timing was ideal and led to BMBC proving £6,000 reward funding so that the **Barnsley 'Name that tag!' campaign** could be channeled through them as part of their national campaign.

The distribution of the posters was also a partnership initiative. The Transport Executive and Stagecoach were very supportive and both offered £250 towards printing in addition to displaying poster cove cards on relevant buses and vinyl posters on bus shelters.

Posters from the Operation Blight Crimestoppers campaign

Operation Blight cove card carried on all Stagecoach buses in the area

Covert cameras

The analysis had highlighted several locations that had been attacked, cleaned and then attacked again. The use of covert cameras at these locations would stand a realistic chance of success and so 5 locations were selected and cameras installed. Although the cameras failed to identify anyone causing damage one camera detected a drug dealer selling drugs to schoolchildren outside the Co-Op at Mapplewell.

The second aim of Operation Blight was **to reduce the chance of those arrested from re-offending**. We sought to achieve this by
(i) educating offenders in the impact of graffiti on the community and
(ii) instilling a fear of being caught.

These approaches had sensible rooting in situational crime prevention theory.

The first method involved the Children and Young Person Officer (CYPO) attending the secondary school, with the full consent of the Headteacher, and speaking to a large group of young people about the damage that had been caused in the area.

The second method was to simply drop a laminated flyer through the letterboxes of the suspects during the night. The flyer carried the Operation Blight logo and simply said: "We are on to you!"

The team then left it for two weeks before any arrests were made.

The third, longer-term objective was **to prevent young people with no previous graffiti experience from taking it up.**

Presentations to primary school children

PCSOs delivered a 'criminal damage' presentation to all the year 6 children at the local primary schools. The presentations used web technology that allowed the team to take pictures of buildings that the children recognised and then electronically cover the images in graffiti. Other than positive feedback from the children and teachers, this hasn't been subject of evaluation.

The fourth, longer-term objective of Blight was to reassure the community that action was being taken, and this was done in a number of ways.

Red route patrols

The analysis of Transport Executive data enabled several routes to be identified within the three townships that suffered a disproportionate amount of damage, and graffiti in particular. In order to help reassure the community high visibility patrols were conducted in the early evening by PCSOs. Despite the odds the PCSOs arrested two youths spraying a wall.

Leaflet drops

To increase reassurance PCSOs delivered leaflets to over 5,000 homes seeking information about offenders. The leaflets were high quality and were designed to give a clear message that the community concerns were being taken seriously and addressed. The £800 funding for the leaflets was provided by elected members.

Local meetings

The project team took every opportunity to attend local Tenants and Residents groups and Area Forums to update the public on progress.

Media

The media were seen as important in raising the awareness of the problem, appealing for information and then publishing the results and achievements to a wider audience. Early contact was made with the local press and media briefings were carried out at regular intervals to ensure the project was never far from the public arena.

Assessing the Impact of Operation Blight

The objectives of Operation Blight were to:

identify and arrest the offenders
reduce the chance of them re-offending
prevent young people with no previous graffiti experience from taking it up
reassure the community that action was being taken.

Objective 1: Identify and arrest the offenders

A total of 16 young people were arrested as part of Operation Blight. Of those three were identified prior to the poster campaign, two were arrested in the act of spraying and the remaining 11 were identified through the partnership work with Crimestoppers and the schools. Over 175 offences of graffiti were admitted, and 60 detections were recorded.

Chart 1 - Sanction Detection rates for criminal damage comparing Darton and Dodworth with Barnsley and SYP averages
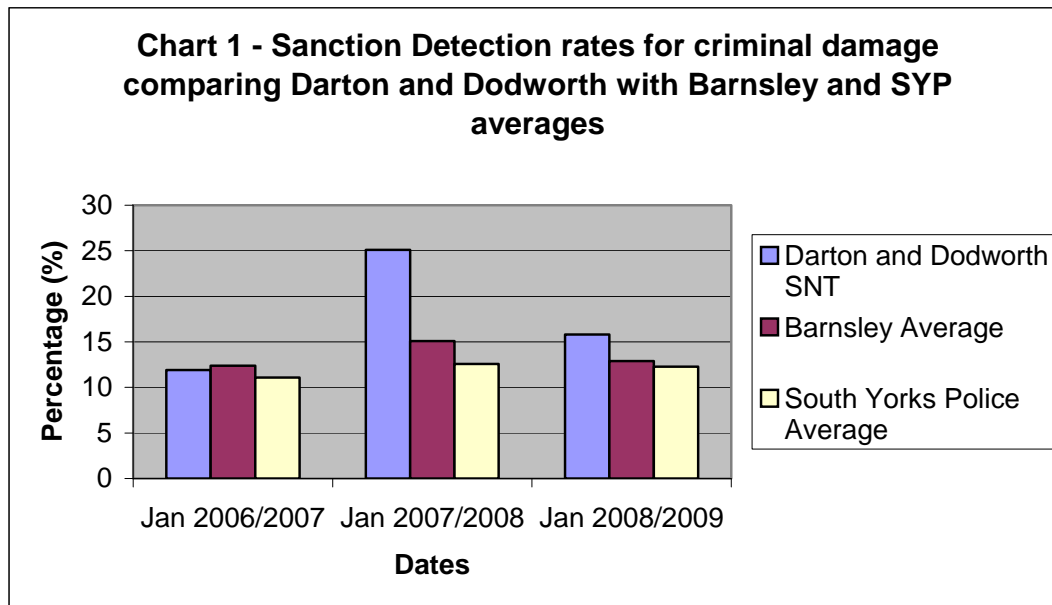

Chart 1 not only shows the massive increase in the detection rate during the project in 2006 but also the raised levels of detection in 2008/9 despite massive reductions in the same year (chart 2 post).

Objective 2: Reduce the likelihood of re-offending

It's two years since the first arrests were made and since then none of the 16 young people have been re-arrested for criminal damage. Nine young people have had no further involvement with the police but the remaining 7 have been arrested for various offences including possession of drugs, theft and assault.

In order to understand the reasons for changes in behaviour, we interviewed a sample of 9 offenders about their experiences of Operation Blight. The interviews were conducted by a Sheffield University student. The aim of the interviews was to establish which elements of Operation Blight (fliers, posters/newspaper features and the school workshops) were effective in changing offending behaviour. We wanted to know what aspects worked, for whom, and why.

The context in which the offenders lived and socialised was an important aspect to take into account. E.g. Young people who have weak family relationships, do not attend school or are socially isolated are more likely to commit graffiti without caring about the impact on the community. In contrast, young people who had stable home

environments and were active in their communities were more likely to commit graffiti as part of a 'subculture' and may respond better to responses bases on 'shaming' and 'fear'. Both would require different treatment/prevention strategies.

Therefore, we adopted a theoretical framework, which supported these ideas. We sought to explore the relationship between the impact of Operation Blight and the Social Capital of the offenders. Social capital is a term used to describe connections between social networks whose members share common values. Where members of a community interact, co-operate and share values, high levels of social capital exist. These kinds of communities impose positive and negative sanctions on wanted and unwanted behaviour accordingly.

Through the interviews with offenders, we wanted to know whether the individual's social capital and the cohesion of the community dictated the kind of strategy that was successful. We characterised the different initiatives of Operation Blight as 'fear inducing' (where the effect was to make the offender afraid of being caught) and 'shame inducing' (where the effect was that the offender was ashamed of being judged by his family, friends or local community).

Which Elements of Operation Blight Were Effective

All the participants interviewed said they no longer intended to commit graffiti offences. Interestingly, some said that they continued to do graffiti, but not on public property (decorating their school books or using paper instead).

Interviewees were asked to explain what impact the different elements of Operation Blight had had. The data showed that different elements of 'Operation Blight' worked for different people at different times.

Posters and Newspaper features

Five interviewees claimed that the posters had a significant impact on their behaviour. Reasons given for the impact included fear of getting caught, community disapproval of behaviour and fear of community disapproval as a result of being caught.

School Presentations

Three interviewees said the school presentations had a significant impact on them, however the remaining six were not in school as they were either truanting or excluded. Reasons given for the impact of the school sessions included fear of being reported because of the rewards being offered, and a general fear of being caught.

Fliers

Out of all the interviewees, seven mentioned receiving fliers, the other two respondents did not receive these as they were caught in the act of spraying graffiti.

Only one interviewee felt this had a significant impact on him as he was worried about his family's reaction. He didn't view the flier as having the most impact upon him.

That said the aim of the fliers was to reassure the community that action was being taken and so the team weren't too despondent with their lack of impact with the interviewees.

Linking social capital theory with the 'what worked and why' question

As outlined above, the posters tended to induce shame, whereas school presentations induced fear of being caught, the fliers had little to no effect at all and different interviewees were affected by different elements in different circumstances.

Through a series of questions designed to measure the interviewee's levels of social capital, we were able to identify some relationships between the effectiveness of strategies and the levels of social capital.

Participants who had low levels of social capital reported not to have been particularly affected by either fear inducers such as the fliers and school visits or shame inducing methods such as the posters.

Participants who had high levels social capital in the form of family/friend relationships but who lived in communities which lacked strong social networks were most affected by talks in schools. They expressed a lack of concern about

how the community would react, and instead were more affected by the fear of being caught.

Participants who reported high levels of social capital (within family networks and in close-knit communities) were most affected by the posters and the shame induced by them. This group also appeared to be more affected by the operation on a personal level.

Objective 3: **to prevent young people with no previous graffiti experience from taking it up**

Two years on from the start of Blight and anecdotal evidence from residents suggests the school talks were effective is reducing the numbers of young people taking us graffiti almost as a rite of passage in that area.

Police crime statistics would support that view as can be seen from Chart 2 below which shows dramatic reductions in damage in Darton/Dodworth in comparison to local and force averages.

Chart 2 - Reductions in criminal damage over 3 year period - pre, during and post Blight
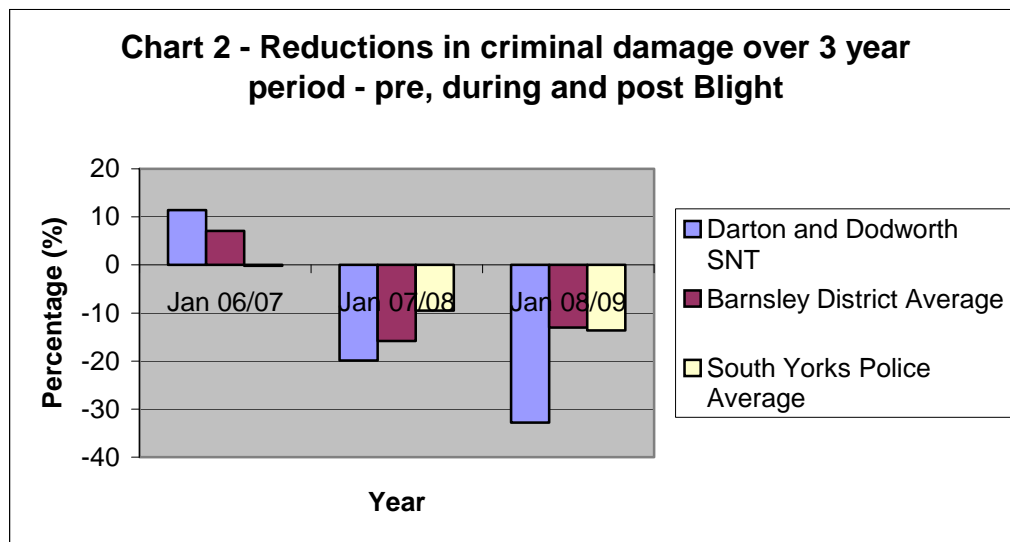
Interestingly the chart also shows reductions have continued to increase post Blight, indicating perhaps that younger people may not now be following in the footsteps of their older peers.

Objective 4: Reassure the community that action was being taken.

The responses section highlights the efforts made to get the message across to the public, however it's difficult to measure how successful we were.

The objective was set two years before SPI 2.2 (police dealing with things that matter to communities), and although there are annual confidence figures available for the wider area there still isn't a quick and easy way of measuring the impact of tactical interventions at a local level. The current inability of SYP to separate Darton and Dodworth SNT from the wider SNA also makes it very difficult to provide any data in support of this aim.

Words: 3965

Authorisation:
Chairperson: **Chief Superintendent Andy Brooke** Andy.brooke@southyorks.pnn.police.uk **'I fully support this application. Graffiti featured highly in the CDRP Strategic Intelligence Assessment and this has met a clearly identified local need.'**