

A Lancashire Constabulary Geographic Initiative

Operation Acne - Summary

For years the Highfield Road area of Blackpool, had suffered from a juvenile nightmare, particularly on Friday and Saturday evenings. There could be eighty, 11 to 17 year old youths, congregating and touring up and down the road and surrounding streets, causing criminal damage, committing assaults and behaving in an anti social manner, particularly after consuming alcohol.

In early 1999, evidence generated from complaints, intelligence information and the drain on police, resources in dealing with incidents, prompted a decision to tackle the problem using a problem solving approach, as all other previous reactive solutions had failed. Computer systems were interrogated to ascertain the timing and worst locations for the problem, local residents and trades people were consulted, as were the local Ward Beat officers. It was found that the juveniles would begin to congregate from 6pm, particularly outside the gates to the local park. Most juveniles attended the local High school and were from good homes but their parents were not aware what they were doing. Only a small percentage of the juveniles were actually involved in the criminal behaviour, the remainder were 'hangers on' and at worst just contributing to the problems.

Operation Acne was thus formulated with intention in the short term, to provide a hi-visibility :Police presence in the area, coupled with covert observation points in the worst locations.. The local Headteacher agreed to patrol with the Police, both to identify the youths and also to provide continuity by speaking to them in school the following week. Also a letter system was devised whereby juveniles who were congregating in groups were spoken to, names and addresses were taken, a pro forma completed, letters generated and sent to their parents to inform them of their child's behaviour.

After only a matter of weeks, the impact of the operation was obvious, with very few juveniles to be seen on Highfield Road and the surrounding streets, and a large reduction in the number of complaints from residents in the area.

In the long term, we had to look at why they were congregating and what extra facilities or amenities could provide some form of entertainment for these juveniles. This culminated in providing a Young Peoples Community / Social Information Bus, setting up of a young peoples cafe 1 bar and the running of disco's, all assisted by Blackpool Borough Council Youth Workers.

OPERATION ACNE

Scanning

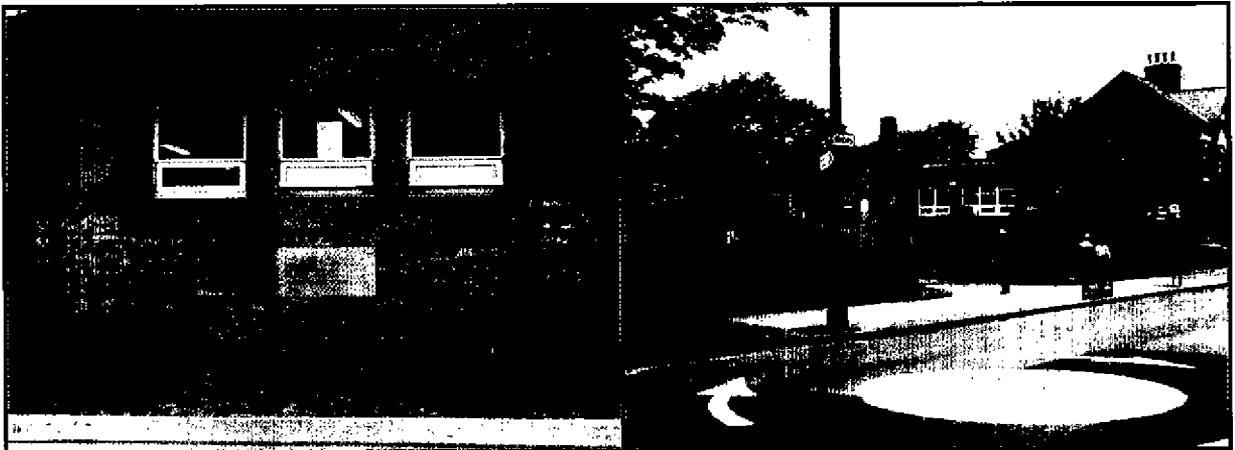
Historically, there has been a juvenile problem on Highfield Road Blackpool, and its surrounding streets. Several attempts by individual officers had been made, over previous years, to try to solve the problem, but they were unsuccessful in that the problem had been solved in the short term, but continually reappeared after only a short period of time. There had not been a consolidated team effort nor a problem orientated approach to the solution.

By early 1999, the Police were receiving an increasing number of complaints regarding the juveniles, both as telephone calls at the time of the nuisance and continued contact with the Ward Beat Officers from local Councillors, traders and residents.

The complaints about the juveniles ranged from intimidation due to the large numbers congregating, drinking and causing disorder, to criminal damage, assault and theft.

At this time, the area was considered to be the worst juvenile 'hot spot' in the town, with a large amount of police time spent responding to, and dealing with the individual incidents. The Ward Beat Officers were repeatedly spending time speaking to local residents and traders about the situation. This was a vast drain on resources, particularly on a Friday and Saturday evening in a busy holiday resort like Blackpool.

This problem was therefore prioritised and it was decided that a short, medium and long term solution was needed, to both lower the number of complaints received by the police and to allow the residents, traders and customers, to regain a normal lifestyle. This would fall in to line with the Constabulary's corporate strategy by addressing juvenile nuisance and disorder, and increasing public confidence and satisfaction.



Analysis

Geographically, Highfield Road runs east to west and is a mile and a half in length, half of which is made up of retail shops, a public house, club and several fast food outlets. The other half of the road comprises of residential properties, a large High school and a park. The road:itself runs through three Ward Beat areas, each having its own Ward Beat Officer.

The three .Ward Beat Officers were tasked with speaking to their local Councillors, residents and trades people to assess their perspective on the problem and, also to interrogate the Police IT systems, to analyse the crime statistics and also the incident logs for their particular .Ward Beat Area. A meeting was then arranged with the POP Sergeant, who was to be the liaison officer, in an attempt to compile as accurate a picture as possible, and to examine the full extent of the problem.

The result of the analysis by the officers, was that in general, the complainants as to the general nuisance and disorder, were elderly local residents, or people who were using the facilities or amenities on Highfield Road or the park. They felt intimidated by the large groups of juveniles who both congregated in certain areas, or toured up and down the road. The victims of crime tended to be the tradespeople, who were suffering from graffiti, theft and bouts of criminal damage to property,

On analysing the most prevalent locations for complaints, it transpired that the gates to the local park were the main congregating place, and that the park itself had suffered numerous attacks from juveniles, with a large amount of damage being committed, although this had gone unreported by the council.

It was also found that a large proportion of the crime was not actually reported to the Police, for several reasons, mainly the perceived trivial nature of the damage, the fact that it was 'only kids doing it' and 'I know the Police are too busy dealing with other things'. This showed that whatever crime figures we could produce, they would not be a true reflection or indication as to the full extent of the situation, everyone who was spoken to in relation to this analysis, was actively encouraged to report all incidents to the Police.

The offenders were aged between 12 and 17 years of age, and up to 80 could be seen congregating or touring up and down the road at any given time, particularly on a Friday and Saturday evening between 6pm and midnight. The majority of these youths attended the local High school, and came from good homes, the parents were obviously not aware as to the full extent of their children's activities whilst they were away from home.

There was only a small percentage of juveniles who could be classed as the 'ring leaders'. There were those that were actually involved in the majority of the crime and disorder, and the rest, the 'sheep', were just hangers on, and although not actively participating in the problems, were vastly contributing to the intimidation and fear felt by the general public.

Alcohol had a large bearing on the attitude and overall behaviour of the juveniles and obviously inflamed situations. Information was that the alcohol was usually purchased from local off-licences, and that these under age drinkers would wait close to the off-licences and pester legitimate customers, to purchase alcohol for them. Several would do so, due to fear of reprisals should they refuse and the pure intimidation that these juveniles caused.

The amenities and facilities for young people in the area were found to be somewhat lacking. There is a park, with grassed areas for recreational use, a children's playground and bowling greens, but due the damage caused on the park, the Parks Department of the Council, and other park users, were not actively encouraging the juveniles to use the park for fear of further problems, and the park itself was locked and secured at sunset.

There is a youth club, which is held in the school on a Friday evening and is run by the local council. Although this was attended by quite a few youths, there were problems when the youth club closed in the evening and during holidays when the youth club was not running. Analysis needed to take place to ascertain why there were problems with the club and what could be done to rectify these.

Previously the juveniles had just been moved on or dealt with for individual incidents or in isolated situations. This method had not worked as the juveniles had quickly returned and the situation had gone back to its original state. They had obviously not heeded what the Police alone were telling them and this would have to be reinforced in other ways.

It was obvious that a plan had to be devised, in which we could, in the short term, restore peace and tranquillity in the area, which would in turn, lower the numbers of complaints received and therefore minimise the resource having to be deployed. But also there had to be a long-term plan, which would enable these effects to be maintained and even improved.

Response

From this analysis of the situation, it was decided to formulate what was to be known as Operation Acne (a juvenile problem which is hard to get rid of).

It was decided to exploit the fact that most of these juveniles were not actually committing crime or disorder and that most of them went to the same local school.

Short Term

The initial plan was to flood the area with hi visibility Policing the objective being to remove the juveniles from the area. The Headteacher of the school was approached and he willingly undertook to go on patrol with officers, with a view to both identifying the juveniles and also so that he could continue with the education process during the following week in the school environment, particularly with those that he had spoken to during the weekend.

It was also decided that parents should play a part in this educational process. It was unfeasible for the Police to personally visit each and every parent of the juveniles that had been spoken to. A juvenile letter system was therefore devised, which would enable a letter to be generated and sent to the parents of the juveniles whom the Police had spoken to.

A simple flow chart was devised which would show the path that was to be taken with the juveniles. The process ranged from an 'A' letter, which would be sent to the parents of the 'sheep', informing them that their child had been spoken to by the Police, and requesting that they reiterate what had been said. A 'B' letter was generally for the 'ring leaders' and would outline exactly what the child had been doing wrong and ask for support from the parents, or should an arrest be made, the process chart indicated what action was to be taken. A copy of the letters would automatically be sent to the Headteacher. After either three 'A' letters or two 'B' letters, the parents were requested to contact the station Inspector, to arrange a visit so that they could discuss their child's behaviour and the problems that they were causing. Should they fail to contact the Inspector, then a personal visit was made, either by the Inspector or the POP Sergeant, to the home address, to speak to the parents directly.

This short term strategy, was to be implemented as soon as possible. This would make the initial break through and show local people that the Police were taking their problems seriously, 'but the strategy would also enable the Police officers to deal with other local issues, particularly with the imminent arrival of the holiday season.

The operation was launched on Friday 16th April 1999 and consisted of Ward Beat Officers, members of the Special Constabulary, the Schools Liaison Police Officer and the Geographical Patrol Officers who were on 'float day' and provided a hi-visibility foot patrol on Highfield Road and it's surrounding streets. Head Quarters Mounted Section was also provided two officers to assist in this hi-visibility patrol.

Two officers from the Divisional Licensing Unit visited all the licensed premises in the area, informing them of the findings of the analysis and the on going operation, and warning them of the consequences of supplying alcohol to underage persons.

Two plain clothed officers, were situated in a covert observation point, close to the park entrance to video record the juveniles. This either backed up any prosecution, to show to parents to back up the letters sent, or to allow the Headteacher to identify the juveniles involved. The Headteacher also patrolled with two plain clothed officers in a plain vehicle, to observe the main offenders and allow uniformed officers to attend and deal with those juveniles.

Blackpool Borough Council Park Security officers were also made aware of the operation, the Police Officers on patrol were in possession of a radio linked directly to the security officers, so that they could direct the patrols to any potential problem areas.

Any juveniles who were congregating in groups were spoken to, details taken and a juvenile pro-forma completed, those juvenile's parents would then receive the appropriate letter.

Short Term Assessment

This operation ran for three weekends, with a scaled down operation running for the following three weekends. This was due mainly to the fact that it was very resource intensive, and that an initial review made after the first three weeks, looking at the number of complaints and reported crimes showed reductions. This was endorsed by consultation with local residents, traders and Ward Beat Officers.

A costing plan of the operation was made, and although it was resource intensive, a small overtime budget was allowed, approximately 20 hours, however the resources used were those generally available and had not been taken off other policing activities.

Medium Term

To continue the Police presence after the operations six week initial time span, a Special Constable was given overall responsibility for the continued policing of the area during the weekend evenings, backed up by at least one of the Ward Beat Officers, this would give a continued high profile uniform presence. There was also a Police surgery established in a building on the park that was staffed by the Ward Beat officers on a Friday evening in order to give the residents and park users reassurance.

In the long term several issues had to be looked at. Why were so many juveniles congregating in this area, what could be provided to take them off the streets, and who could provide it. The police could and would take ownership of the actual disorder element on the streets, but other agencies had to become involved in the long-term aspect of the project.

Long Term

After the initial short sharp shock of the operation on the street, consultation was made with the juveniles, through the school, to ascertain their thoughts on the operation and to solicit their views on what was needed to maintain and improve the situation.

In general, the views were that there was nowhere for them to go and nothing to do, even though they were living in a town with more amenities than most, being a large holiday town. These attractions were mainly geared to tourists, were expensive to use, and facilities provided were not in the immediate area, and were therefore not readily accessible. Mainly they just wanted somewhere to go rather than something organised for them to do. It was apparent that the youth club held in the school was 'like going back to school' and it was commented that the club could be better run.

Contact was made with Blackpool Borough Council, with a view to providing some form of shelter, which could be strategically placed away from any residential or industrial area, where the juveniles could congregate, without causing nuisance or disturbance. Although the Council wholeheartedly backed the idea and did have some old concrete bus shelters, which had recently been removed and replaced by new ones, the availability of a suitable site proved difficult to find.

Because a suitable site could not be found for a meeting place, the idea was put forward that a mobile site may be provided; Blackpool Borough Council were again approached and the transport department agreed to donate a double-decker bus. This was to be made into a mobile cafe bar downstairs, with a contact centre complete with computer and Internet facility upstairs. Sponsorship was found for the equipment and the local college undertook to do the fitting and decoration of the bus, which could then be used not only in the Highfield Road area, but also in numerous other areas within the town which were experiencing similar problems.

Further consultation was made with the juveniles who said that the idea of the bus was good, but could this be taken a step further, with the provision a permanent cafe bar which could then be run as a youth centre, instead of a formal youth club. This would provide a convenient meeting place and would obviously keep them off the streets in what would be an informal atmosphere where they would also be supervised.

The Police could obviously not take ownership of this type of project, and a consultative group was formed between Police, local Councillors, youth workers, the school and local traders association, to find what premises could be available, what funding would be available, what services it would be feasible to provide and who would be in a position to provide them. The youth workers agreed that it would fall under their remit, to staff such a venture, but that it would benefit the project if it were partially staffed by local volunteers, who could provide an degree of continuity with the juveniles, and that this would be an ideal opportunity to set up a community group, in which some of the juveniles could sit on the committee. Suitable premises are being sought for the project.

Assessment

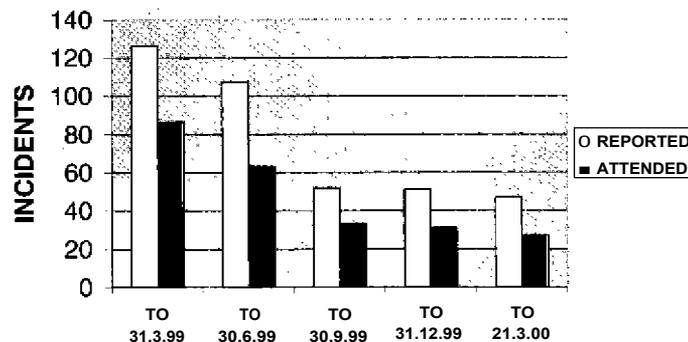
The short-term approach was very easy to evaluate by using the previously mentioned search criteria on the number of complaints and recorded crime, measured against the previous figures. This might give a somewhat distorted view, because the residents and other local people had been actively encouraged to contact the police, where previously they had been reticent to do so. This would possibly raise the figures in the short term, but should, with time, even out.

Our success criteria was a noticeable reduction on groups of juveniles seen congregating and touring round the area, this is continually evaluated by Police monitoring and local contacts.

After only the first three weekends, a marked reduction in the numbers of juveniles in and around the area was found, and the residents were making very favourable comments about the reduction of disorder, which showed us that the initial response we took had worked well.

By continuing with the medium and long term actions, coupled with the regular patrols by the nominated officers and constant monitoring of the above mentioned figures, it was shown, by the end of the year that the number of complaints regarding juveniles had reduced dramatically.

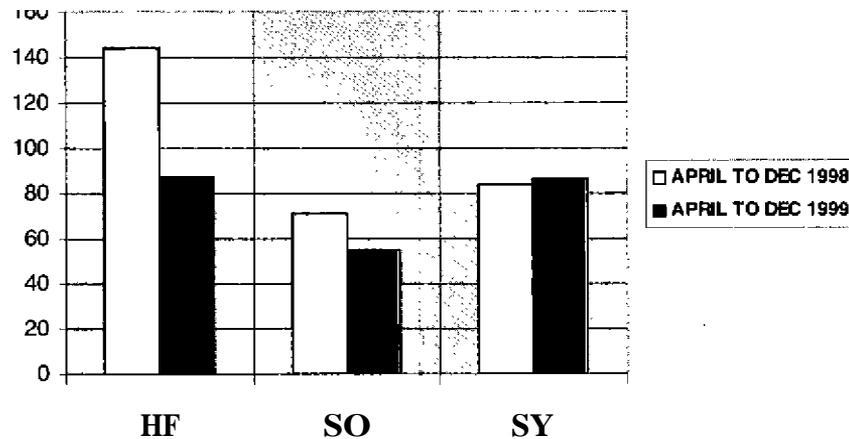
HIGHFIELD PARK AREA JUVENILE INCIDENTS 1999



The three pieces of data used to evaluate the project were a comparison of juvenile nuisance figures within 500 meters of Highfield Road park, for the 4 quarters of 1999, this showed an overall reduction of 64% during the year.

A comparison of the juvenile nuisance figures for the three Ward Beat areas, between April to December 1998 and the same period in 1999, showed two of the wards had a 40% and 22.5 % reduction but in one of the wards there was actually a 1.6% increase in the number of complaints.

JUVENILE INCIDENTS BY AREA 1998 TO 1999



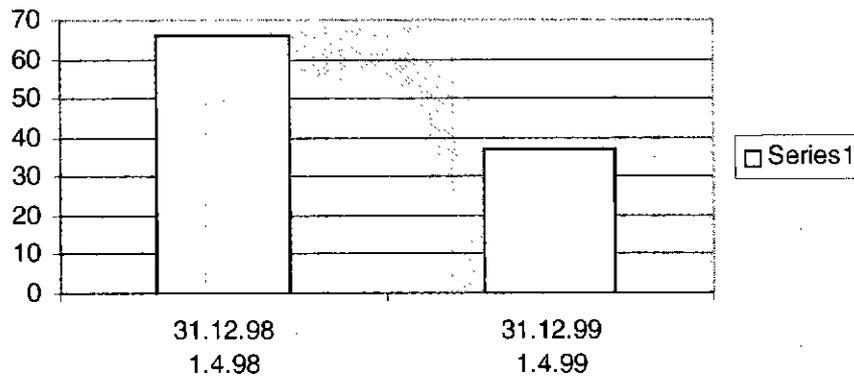
This was not totally unexpected, because by concentrating efforts in one particular area, there was obviously going to be some displacement of the problem, and by proper analysis of the figures, it was possible to slightly amend the areas in which the patrols worked, so as to lessen these figures also.

By analysis of the figures and by local observations, it was found that on the Ward Beat where the figures had risen, one particular alleyway, which led from a main road into a cul-de-sac, was being used by the local youths, to continue with their anti-social behaviour and was attracting a large number of complaints. Following consultation with local residents and businesses, it was agreed that the best course of action would be to put large gates across both ends of the alleyway, which would provide keyed access for the residents and shopkeepers, who were the only people to have reasonable use of this alleyway, and would prevent the juveniles from entering. Funding was provided by local shopkeepers, residents, Neighbourhood Watch organisation and a grant made by the Lancashire Partnership against Crime, and this quickly put a stop to the juvenile activity in that area.



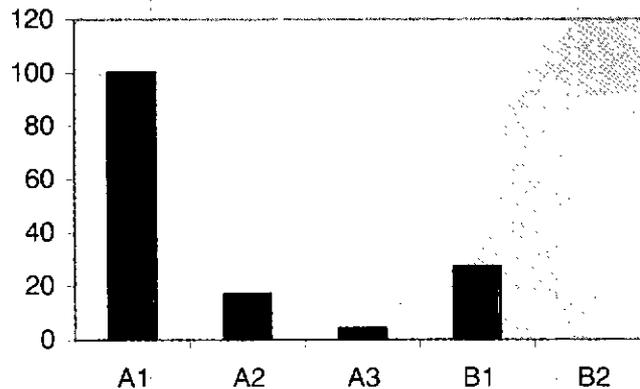
The third evaluation figures were a comparison of juvenile nuisance figures between April and December 1998 and the same period in 1999, for the number of complaints actually on Highfield Road, these showed a reduction of 44%.

Highfield Road Juvenile Nuisance



It became obvious very early on in the evaluation stage that to compare actual crime figures in the area would be very difficult. The Home Office had changed the counting rules for certain crimes, i.e. minor damage, common assault, during the periods we would be looking at for proper evaluation and as such, the figures we would be able to produce would not show a true reflection on the situation.

Breakdown of Letters Sent



The letter system proved effective and many parents have contacted the police for more information regarding their child's behaviour and have been very supportive and thankful that the police have informed them.

Conclusion

The initiative proved so successful that other geographic areas adopted similar tactics to combat their juvenile nuisance problems especially with regard to the letter system. Other divisions within the Lancashire Constabulary have approached the Headteachers of their local schools with a view to initiating partnerships to address the behaviour of school children. The initiative is now accepted Forcewide: as best practice.

Operation Acne will continue to evolve and will be constantly assessed for effectiveness. The partnerships now established with Blackpool Borough Council Youth Workers and the Schools will continue and provide a sustainable solution to a problem which has plagued the police in this area for years.