

CAR CLEAR PARTNERSHIP

A PARTNERSHIP APPROACH TO THE PROBLEM OF VEHICLE ARSON

AVON AND SOMERSET CONSTABULARY, AVON FIRE BRIGADE HEADQUARTERS,
ENGLAND, 2002

SUMMARY:

The Partners involved in this project are the Avon and Somerset Police, Avon Fire Brigade and the Local Authorities of Bristol, Bath and North East Somerset, South Gloucestershire and North Somerset. The Partnership commenced in late 2000 and initially involved the Police, Fire and just Bristol City Council. The Partnership was formed to combat the growing problem of vehicle arson and linked with that, the growing problem of abandoned vehicles.

The extent of the problem was identified by examining Fire Brigade statistics on the number of deliberate vehicle fires they attended and the Local Authority's figures on the number of dangerous abandoned vehicles removed under the existing Police/Local Authority Partnership's '101' scheme. These figures showed that Avon Fire Brigade attended over 2000 vehicle arsons a year which accounted for over 50% of their total calls, and was increasing at over 20% a year. The figures on abandoned vehicles removed under the 101 scheme in South Bristol had also increased from its start in July 1999 of 30 vehicles a month to a figure in November 2000 of 100 a month. The Partnership decided on a strategy aimed at reducing vehicle arson and speeding up the recovery of abandoned vehicles. This strategy revolved around four elements.

1. Community Awareness: Informing the public of the problem and offering them ways of helping to reduce it.
2. Targeting Offenders: Entering schools and educating the key offender group of 14-16 year olds and applying peer pressure by discussion and awareness.
3. Reducing the supply of Unroadworthy Vehicles: Offering the public ways of surrendering their "end of life" vehicle which was cost effective for them.
4. Vehicle Removal Schemes: Identifying potential targets for vehicle arson and removing them from the street.

A trial of the strategy was conducted in the South Bristol Area between January and September 2001. South Bristol was chosen as statistically it had the most problems in the region with over 800 vehicle arsons a year. If successful here the Partnership believed it would be elsewhere. This strategy had a huge impact on South Bristol with all elements of the strategy proving very successful. Vehicle arson was reduced by 3.5% at a time when the rest of Bristol suffered an increase of over 20% and nationally the increase was 12%, providing a cost saving of £50,800 for the Fire brigade

INTRODUCTION

In November 2000 Avon Fire Brigade approached Avon and Somerset Police to discuss the ever increasing problem of Vehicle Arson. South Bristol Police District was the Bristol Lead District for dealing with vehicle crime so led the project on behalf of Avon and Somerset Police. It was decided from the outset to use the SARA model to help solve this problem.

Scale of the problem

Avon Fire brigade were attending over 2100 Vehicle arsons a year in the Avon area (Bristol, North Somerset, Bath and North East Somerset and South Gloucestershire). The figures broke down as follows:

■ Bristol City	1,450
■ Bath and N.E. Somerset	175
■ North Somerset	202
■ South Gloucestershire	275

The year on year increase was over 20% with vehicle arsons doubling since 1998. Research of the figures showed that 46% of the vehicles set alight were stolen vehicles with the other 54% being abandoned vehicles. These percentages remained constant despite the area, with a constant 10% of all stolen vehicles being set alight.

It was decided to extend the Partnership to include Bristol City Council as abandoned vehicles would have to be targeted and they had already been part of a successful partnership with South Bristol Police which targeted abandoned vehicles. (101 scheme which is detailed below).

The Partnership then decided on a name for the project which was to be "Car Clear". The Partnership also decided that their efforts would be directed towards reducing vehicle arson on abandoned vehicles as other groups were already addressing the issue of reducing stolen vehicles.

History of abandoned vehicle problem

The abandoned vehicles problem in South Bristol came to a head in early 1999, with a series of articles in the Bristol Evening Post, which vividly showed the streets of South Bristol littered with burnt out and badly vandalised vehicles. The articles were accurate with some areas of South Bristol, namely the large local authority housing areas of Knowle West and Hartcliffe, looking more like war zones than communities. The Police in South Bristol decided that something had to be done and researched the law on abandoned vehicles, namely the ROAD TRAFFIC REGULATIONS ACT 1984 Section 99-101. They discovered that the Police and Local Authority did have a power to immediately remove any vehicle that was causing a danger to other road users by way of its condition or circumstances.

It was recognised that burnt out or vandalised vehicles did create a danger to other road users particularly children, who were drawn to these vehicles like magnets with the obvious dangers being from broken glass and leaking engine fluids. A Police owned and funded scheme was set up with a local recovery agent to remove these vehicles within 24 hours of notification.

The Police were recovering around 30 vehicles per month for the first 3 months of the scheme with the positive effects on the estates immediately obvious. After 3 months Bristol City Council were approached and immediately saw the benefits of the scheme, funding the pilot for the next 9 months.

The success of the scheme continued and in April 2000 it was spread to the rest of Bristol, fully funded by Bristol City Council but operated by the Police. The scheme is called the 101 Scheme and in South Bristol the number of vehicles recovered per month has risen from the initial 30 to 100.

All vehicles recovered under this scheme are removed within 24 hours of the City Council being informed and "crushed". The effect of this

scheme on the communities was to bring an air of normality where burnt out and vandalised vehicles no longer littered the streets but were removed very quickly. Although very successful, the increase in numbers of vehicles recovered suggested that abandoned vehicles were increasing at an unacceptable rate.

Community vehicles

In policing terms the problem of "community vehicles" (used by many, owned by no-one, left abandoned on housing estates and used in crime) had been around for many years before it came to a head in the early 1990's. These vehicles were used by active criminals who were often disqualified from driving. The vehicles were used time and again until broken down, when they would be abandoned on housing estates where they became target practice' for the local youths or stripped for their parts. These vehicles just "littered" the streets and were often set on fire.

South Bristol Police created "Operation Crush" as theirs was the biggest problem in Bristol. This operation was designed to get these vehicles off the road and to frustrate the criminal. Although it had an effect it was never intended to address the environmental problem of vandalised or burnt out vehicles. The operation allowed for the removal of any vehicle, fitting the South Bristol Police's definition of a "community vehicle". This was done in partnership with a local garage at a cost to the Police. The definition used was:

A vehicle which has a previous keeper or an owner who denies ownership and has 'an involved in crime' marker on PNC and not displaying a valid exise licence.

There was no legislation to cover this but was done on a risk assessment that identified that virtually all of these cars were of little value and that "owners" were unlikely to claim the vehicle due to the outstanding criminal offence it had been involved in.

The scheme was in Police terms a success and was spread to the whole Avon and Somerset Police area.

Unfortunately this scheme was lost in June 2000 but the increase in community vehicles since this date was very noticeable, as was the fact that most "community vehicles" ended up being set alight.

The Partnership was aware of the cycle an abandoned vehicle went through i.e.:

Abandoned → Stripped → Vandalised → Set Fire

and that this speeded up in certain areas (referred to as "Hot Spots") especially when a "7 day notice" was applied by the City Council (usual removal policy).

The Partnership saw the addressing of the problem of vehicle arson and abandoned vehicles as a priority because of the environmental effect on the community and its unarguable link to increased crime and disorder.

Interested individuals and agencies and how affected

- **Avon Fire Brigade:** increase in number of "call outs". Over 50% of calls are to vehicle arsons, thus restricting their ability to respond to more serious fires and incidents. These calls are at a cost of £750,000 to the Fire Brigade.
- **Avon & Somerset Police:** increase in number of incidents to attend, restricting their ability to respond to other types of incident. An increase in youth disorder problems as a result of youths "getting away with it" and then taunting the police. A lack in confidence from the public in the ability of the Police to deal with youth disorder.
- **Local Authority:** residents dissatisfied with the safety of their communities. Increase in complaints from residents of estates that appear "run down", due to the number of vehicles abandoned in the streets. Hot spot areas suffering from associated damage and disorder problems.
- **Local Residents:** as above plus additional fear of crime. Increase in danger from

exploding vehicles. Increase in danger to children who seem to be attracted to these vehicles to play on and in them. Lack of pride in their neighbourhood.

Evidence to confirm problem exists

1. Statistics from Avon Fire Brigade showing number of incidents and their location.
2. Increase in reports of abandoned vehicles by the public.
3. Increase in "word of mouth" complaints from the public including Neighbourhood Watch and local Councillors.
4. Personal observations of patrolling Police Officers.
5. The increasing number of '101' numbers. From 30 per month in July 1999 to 100 per month in November 2000.

ANALYSIS

What is known about:

The Victim

The victims of this behaviour are the communities and the individual owners of vehicles that have been stolen and then burnt. Anyone that is in the vicinity of a vehicle on fire is a potential victim and that does include Fire Brigade personnel and Police Officers who attend the scene. The victims in respect of damaged abandoned vehicles can be other road users but more importantly the children that play on them who can range in age from 3 years to 16 years.

The Offender

In respect of vehicle arson, particularly those involving stolen vehicles we know that they tend to be males aged 12 years - 25 years. The daily statistics show a sharp increase in vehicle arsons every school holiday, in some cases doubling or even trebling, so the 14-16 years old age group

would seem to be a predominant group. The nature of the offence and the fact that the majority of stolen vehicles are recovered in the same area as they were stolen, suggest that the youths are local to the area.

The Location

There are numerous locations across the city but there are definitely "hot spots" in terms of areas. These hot spots have been identified using Fire Brigade information and by talking to Police Officers working these areas. From this information we are able to produce street maps showing significant cluster sites. In general those hot spots tend to be in areas of local authority housing such as Hartcliffe, Knowle West, Southmead and Lawrence Weston. Worryingly these locations are found in the middle of large housing estates in parks and open land which are frequented by the public and in particular children.

What is the cause of the problem and the desired results?

The causes of the problems are numerous and show that any response will have to be wide and ranging.

1. Stolen vehicles, particularly cars which are again on the increase.
2. Increase in number of vehicles being abandoned on streets.
3. Increase in the number of "community vehicles".
4. Increasing costs of "scrapping" unwanted motor vehicles. The worldwide price of scrap metal has fallen significantly from £120 per ton to the present £60 per ton. Not so long ago car dismantlers would actually pay a vehicle owner for them to take the vehicle and scrap it, it now costs vehicle owners somewhere in the region of £60 to have their vehicles collected and scrapped. *Is the owner of an end of life vehicle likely to pay £60 to scrap it? Or will just abandon it?*

5. Ever increasing lack of respect for their communities by youths, particularly those in their early teens.
6. Lack of positive legislation to help tackle the problem.

The present legislation was drafted in 1984 and it is unlikely that the legislators ever envisaged the proportions of the abandoned vehicle problem we have today. Police Officers scrutinised the legislation and found that it could be interpreted in a way to assist the Partnership in reaching their objectives. They found that Authorities (Police and Local) using this legislation had ignored parts of it tending to just use those parts that explained the standard procedure of removing abandoned vehicles i.e.; affixing a 7 day notice to the vehicle before removing it. Parts of the legislation clearly make it possible to immediately remove vehicles that are damaged and even to remove those vehicles that are not yet damaged but are in circumstances that could cause a danger.

It was this interpretation that gave the Partnership the encouragement to develop more ambitious vehicle recovery schemes and the following objectives.

Objectives

- To reduce the number of vehicle arsons.
- To speed up the removal of abandoned vehicles.
- To reduce the number of vehicles left abandoned and vandalised.
- To reduce the number of "community" type vehicles.
- To reduce the supply of unroadworthy vehicles.
- To encourage the communities desire to "clean up their streets" and work with them to achieve it.

The desired result of these objectives was to obtain the biggest reduction in abandoned vehicles and vehicle arson as possible.

RESPONSE

Summary of proposed action

The Partnership developed a strategy aimed at approaching the problem in every direction. It was decided to implement this strategy in full on the South Bristol Police District for a pilot period of 9 months. The Partnership were of the opinion that if it was successful on South Bristol it could be successful anywhere. South Bristol suffers over 800 vehicle arson each year, the worst area in this region and one of the worst in the country.

The strategy was formed from the work done at the analysis stage and revolves around:

- **Vehicle Removal Schemes** - To implement removal schemes targeting community vehicles and abandoned vehicles that were not yet damaged, but likely to become targets for damage and arson. The partnership accepted and used the legal interpretation as stated in the Analysis section.
- **Community Awareness** - To inform the public of the problem and give them ways of helping the Partnership reduce it.
- **Target Offenders** - To go into the schools to educate the core offender group of 14-16 years about the dangers of this activity and to encourage peer pressure that this was socially unacceptable.
- **Reducing the Supply of Un-roadworthy Vehicles** - To try and identify the sources for community vehicles and liaise with the identified sources in an effort to reduce the supply. To give the public ways of surrendering "end of life" vehicles at a reasonable cost.

Agreed actions

The Partnership agreed to implement 3 new removal schemes as well as to reemphasise the importance of the existing 101 scheme. The aim of these schemes was to remove potential targets for vehicle arson before they became another statistic.

Scheme 1 (Hot Spot)

Statistics have been gathered and three areas of South Bristol identified as “Hot Spots” for vehicle arson. (Hartcliffe, Hengrove, Knowle West).

Any vehicle found by police to be abandoned in a hot spot area and would normally have been subject to 7 day notice procedure will be removed within 24 hours by Bristol City Council without notice.

Bristol City Council will finance this scheme.

Scheme 2 (Community Vehicle)

Any Vehicle fitting the before mentioned definition of a community vehicle will be removed within 30 minutes under the police vehicle recovery scheme.

Avon and Somerset Police will finance this scheme.

Scheme 3 (Police and Fire Brigade Scheme)

It was considered by the partners that there would be times when vehicles needed to be removed to prevent them being set alight, which would not be suitable for either of the before mentioned schemes. For instance, Bristol City Council's removal firm only operated Monday - Friday 0800-2200 hours, so vehicles found in “Hot Spots” may not be collected for some 3 days over a weekend or there may be special circumstances, such as youths tampering with the vehicle, that made its immediate removal desirable.

Any vehicle found by police to be abandoned and circumstances lead them to believe it will be set alight or damaged if not recovered immediately, will be removed within 30 minutes under the police vehicle recovery scheme.

Avon and Somerset Police and Avon Fire Brigade will jointly fund this scheme.

Further agreed actions

- Creation of public 'Hot line' telephone number to report vandalized vehicles.
- Collection of "end of life" vehicles from private addresses for a small charge £17.63
- Assembly of a booklet, highlighting the dangers of vehicle arson and abandoned vehicles as well as giving information on (1) and (2) above to be delivered to all residents in hot spot areas (5000+).
- Poster campaign and education campaign in local schools.
- Media attention to be drawn to the problems and initiatives.
- Enquiries to trace the sources of community vehicles.

A project group, consisting of members from all three organisations was set up to monitor and evaluate the strategy and its implementation. This group would meet and liaise on a regular basis to assess the progress made and the projects direction.

Approaches were made to both the Chief Constable and Chief Fire Officer for funds to help run this strategy with both agreeing to put in funds of £10,000.

How results will be measured

1. Comparing the number of vehicle arsons in previous years to that of the pilot period.

2. The number of abandoned vehicles removed under each scheme.
3. The number of calls received on the public vandalised vehicle hot line.
4. The number of booklets delivered to the public.
5. The number of people surrendering their "end of life" vehicles. 6. The amount of media coverage in papers and television

ASSESSMENT

What results have been achieved to date?

The success of this pilot exceeded our expectations and produced a 3.5% Reduction in vehicle arson in South Bristol. This at a time when the rest of Bristol increased by over 20% and nationally there was an increase of 12%.

There is no doubt that by achieving a reduction in the most effected area in this region we have proved that the partnership approach does work.

There is still plenty of work to be done to improve this reduction but this proves we are headed in the right direction.

Police Officers in South Bristol have noted the environmental improvement in the area and have received general thanks from the public for removing potential targets for vandalism and arson.

The number of calls to the hot line and the comments of the public at Public Meetings have shown the publics support and gratitude for this initiative.

What action was taken by the police?

Training was undertaken to ensure all patrolling officers were aware of the problems and understood the removal schemes that were being piloted. The Operational Support Inspector was

given ownership of the recovery schemes to encourage their use and direction.

Results of agreed actions

- 101 Removal Scheme - 500 vehicles removed.
- Community and Police/Fire Scheme - 250 vehicles removed.
- Vandalised Vehicle Hot Line - Over 900 calls received.
- Booklets for the public - 5000 delivered into hot spot areas.
- Poster Campaign_-_Delivered to all schools in South Bristol.
- Sources of Community Vehicles - Enquiries with major motor dealers and Manheim car auctions in Ashton revealed that there was a large market in very cheap cars with some being sold for as little as £1. Covert operations have led us to believe that many of these vehicles do end up as "Community vehicles" and eventually end up set alight. These enquiries have now led to other initiatives which are detailed below in "Action continuing beyond this assessment."

What action was taken by the Fire Brigade?

Systems were put in place to accurately identify on a weekly basis the frequency and locations of vehicle arsons.

Media attention was encouraged and this resulted in numerous articles in the Bristol Evening Post as well as reports on both television channels.

Further funds were secured by bidding to the Arson Control Forum New Projects Group at the DTLR. £40,000 was secured to help fund these schemes and spread them across Avon.

What action was taken by BCC?

Amended their procedures to allow the removal of "7 Day Notice" vehicles from hot spots within 24 hours without notice.

Parking attendants working for BCC have been trained and now use the 101 Scheme.

Results of agreed actions

- Offering to collect "End of Life" vehicles from the public for £17.63 - 151 vehicles removed.
- Vehicles removed from hot spots without notice - 80 removed.

The partnership considered these results to be a tremendous achievement. It would have been fair to expect South Bristol to have experienced a 20% increase in vehicle arsons without the implementation of this strategy. This would have given South Bristol a total of 646 vehicle arsons during the pilot period. By reducing the vehicle arsons by 3.5% to a figure of 519 it is fair to say that we have reduced the expected total by 127. A cost saving to the Fire Brigade of some £50,800.

Action continuing beyond this assessment

Due to the success of this strategy it was decided to invite the other three Local Authorities of Bath and North East Somerset, North Somerset and South Gloucestershire, into the Partnership so the strategy could be employed Avon wide. All three agreed and the £40,000 gained from the Arson Control Forum is being used to finance this.

Both the Police and Fire Brigade have now committed an officer full time on this project. Inspector Paul Bunt and Station Officer Tony Sim commenced their posts in November 2001 and both work from an office at Avon Fire Brigade Headquarters.

These officers have been responsible for:

- The training of over 1000 Police and Local Authority Officers.
- Entering into consultation with the DTLR over proposed changes in legislation covering abandoned vehicles.
- Entering into consultation with the DTLR and Environment Agency over the "End of Life" European Directive.
- Obtaining support and sponsorship from Bristol Motor Traders and Metal Recyclers.

The implementation of the strategy Avon wide was completed in April 2002.

The Partnership has also been keen to continually improve our strategy and the efficiency of our systems. As a result of this the Partnership identified 4 areas which it felt needed addressing.

These areas were:

1. Even with the success of the strategy South Bristol still experienced over 500 vehicle arsons in the 9 months. Why? What was the breakdown of vehicle types and where should the strategy concentrate?
2. The amount of Police time being spent on identifying vehicles for recovery and then awaiting recovery.
3. The reporting of vehicle arson by both the Fire Services and Police Service. Why do Police only record a of the vehicle arsons that the Fire Service attends?
4. Further promotion of the strategy.

These areas have been analysed and appropriate responses decided upon. These responses will occupy the Partnership for the next few months and are briefly:

- **Area 1** - To restrict the supply of very cheap cars to the public. The Partnership commences the Motor Traders Recovery Scheme on 13 May. This scheme has the support of most motor traders in Bristol and is an agreement that all vehicles which traders would have sold on (to public, auctions and other traders) for £100 or less, they will now not sell and allow the Partnership to collect them free of charge to dispose of how they wish (Crushing!). We have calculated that this will amount to nearly 800 vehicles in 12 months. The Partnership have also negotiated a deal with the main supplier of vehicles to the car auction (Daewoo), that any vehicle which does not fetch £50 will not be sold and instead scrapped.

Also, during May and June, we will be attending a number of vehicle arsons and surveying nearby residents to discover how many of these fires are either recently abandoned vehicles or vehicles abandoned for more than 24 hours (i.e. should we concentrate more on "Community vehicles"?)

- **Area 2** - Experimenting with Traffic Wardens routinely patrolling hot spots specifically to remove vehicles using all the schemes. The Partnership is also negotiating protocols with 3 street warden initiatives for them to do the same thing.

- **Area 3** - Analysis of both reporting systems, will take place in an effort to make them compatible and comply with the needs of both organisations.
- **Area 4** - Training of Fire Officers in the schemes and providing them with a system to report 'suspect vehicles' to the Police. Production of 47,000 more booklets for delivery to the residents of all the hot spots. Erection of Tri-Signs in all the hot spots which will be relocated on a regular basis.

The Partnership are presently compiling a 'Statement of Intent' and exploring the possibility of one vehicle recovery contract instead of the present 5 separate contracts.

In order to evaluate the environmental impact of our strategy on the communities, it is the Partnership's intention to conduct a public survey later in the year.

FOR MORE INFORMATION

Inspector Paul Bunt; Avon Fire Brigade Headquarters; Temple Back, Bristol BS1 6EU; Phone 0117 926 2061 ext. 289; Fax 0117 922 5189; email car.clear@avonfirebrigade.gov.uk