

Lancashire Constabulary



Tilley Award 2003

Operation Park Keeper (Crime & Disorder Reduction)

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Operation Park Keeper

Operation Park Keeper was a **focused, intelligence led, initiative** aimed at addressing the **crime and disorder** blighting the public open spaces of Preston, in particular Moor Park.

Public attention was being drawn to the scale of the problem by a media campaign in the Lancashire Evening Post newspaper entitled '**Our Parks of Shame**'. The continuous headlining of the amount of crime and anti-social nuisance behaviour in the parks was obviously causing concern, not only as regards public safety and the fear of crime, but also public satisfaction with the response to the problem by the police.

Library copies of the newspaper articles were obtained from the Lancashire Evening Post. These demonstrated the depth of local feeling with quotes from representatives of Preston Borough Council, Preston Victim Support and local police officers.

Police crime and incident logging systems showed that in Moor Park, between January and April 2002, there had been **40 crimes and 116 incidents** recorded. These varied in the degree of seriousness from anti-social nuisance to robbery, indecent assault, burglary, damage and theft. Some of these offences had a racial or homophobic aspect.

Moor Park is centrally located within the Preston urban area to the North of the City centre. The park covers an area of 0.2 acres. The park is mainly open grassland criss-crossed by footpaths leading to a sports pavilion and other park amenities. The park is unlit and has unrestricted public access at all times. The layout and size of the area **makes conventional policing difficult** by mobile and foot patrols. Offender escape routes are numerous and lead immediately into the densely populated surrounding areas.

The Air Support Unit was actively looking for ways to use the **Force's helicopter in a more pro-active way** as opposed to the aircrafts normal reactive role. The Air Support Unit is recognised as the most highly visible police resource with a unique ability to deter and disrupt criminal activity over a very wide area. To gain public support and awareness the Lancashire Evening Post crime reporter visited the ASU and flew over the City parks to gain first hand experience of the helicopter's capabilities. Along with local radio stations a high profile media launch publicised the initiative and received much public support from those interviewed by the media.

Throughout June, July & August 2002 the Air Support Unit carried out targeted patrol flights on 47 occasions, a total of 5.40 flying hours. When the figures for 2002 were compared to the same period in 2001 **a reduction of 42% in reported crime** had been achieved.

As the patrol flights were undertaken following operational deployments there was **no additional expense** above the normal ASU operating costs.



Operation Park Keeper

SCANNING

In October 2001 the Lancashire Evening Post (LEP) launched a media campaign 'Make Our Parks Safe'. The campaign highlighted the level of crime and nuisance in the parks and open spaces in the Preston, the papers main area of circulation. The article had the headline '**Our Parks of Shame**'.

Chief Inspector Bob Helm was quoted as saying: "**People who go to the parks definitely need to be aware of the issues going on in there, in the same way that we need to know what is happening. If there's anything that can be done to make these places safer we must look towards pursuing these actions**"

Steve Jones, Preston Director of Regeneration, Community and Leisure Services said: '**We see a bigger and better future for Preston Parks**'

Pat Morgan, branch manager of Preston Victim Support said: "**We welcome any innovations or campaigns which would improve the parks of Preston.**"

Following the LEP launch of the 'Make Our Parks Safe' campaign the reporter Sonja Karlsen continued to bring to public attention the problems of crime and anti-social behaviour blighting the public open spaces in the Preston area.

Police crime and incident logging systems revealed that between January and April 2002, in Moor Park alone, there had been 40 recorded crimes and 116 incidents reported. There was a varying degree of seriousness from anti-social nuisance to robbery, indecent assault, burglary, damage and theft.

Haslam, Avenham Waverley and Ashton parks did not have the volume of offences compared to Moor Park but there were still offences and incidents taking place of a similar nature. Waverley Park had two arson offences recorded involving vehicles being driven onto the park under cover of darkness and destroyed by fire.

ANALYSIS

For analysis purposes I focused on Moor Park because it was typical of all the parks in the Preston area and also because it was by far the area of most concern as highlighted above.

FEATURES OF PLACE

Moor Park is centrally located within the Preston urban area to the North of the city centre. The park covers an area of 0.2 square miles and is bounded on all sides by

urbanisation. The area is mainly open grassland criss-crossed by footpaths leading to the sports pavilion and other park amenities.

Three arterial routes, Blackpool Road to the North, Garstang Road to the West and Deepdale Road to the East form a perimeter to the park. To the South are Moor Park Avenue and St. Thomas Road.

Moor Park Avenue has limited vehicular access to premises and some of the park amenities. Moor Park Avenue is, however, a very well used pedestrian walkway, both day and night, linking Deepdale Road and Garstang Road. A large school, college annexe, tennis club, local authority office and bowling greens are all situated between Moor Park Avenue and St. Thomas Road. At the Deepdale Road end is the Preston North End football stadium and Legends nightclub.

The park area is completely unlit at night apart from some street lighting along Moor Park Avenue. The whole area has unrestricted public access at all times. The layout and size of the area makes policing difficult both by mobile and foot patrols. Trying to contain the area when a crime is in progress is very manpower intensive and usually beyond the capabilities of a busy Division like Preston. Offender escape routes are numerous and lead immediately into the densely populated surrounding areas.

The crime and incident statistics demonstrate quite clearly that it was the area along Moor Park Avenue that suffered the brunt of the problems in terms of burglary, damage to and stealing from vehicles and attacks on people.

FEATURES OF CALLER/PROBLEM

The majority of offences were committed against motor vehicles and occurred during the afternoon or early evening. Most were vehicles that had been left unattended whilst their owners were at the various premises along Moor Park Avenue. The Modus Operandi, in the main, is to break a side window to gain access to the vehicle.

13.15/13.55hrs on 14/4/02

Unknown offenders approached secure and unattended Ford Fiesta parked on tree lined avenue outside high school adjacent to popular local park using unknown instrument broke glass in front nearside window gained entry stole property leaving scene undetected.

Offences involving violence or of a sexual nature are rare but obviously very serious. Last year there was the rape attack that was featured on the BBC's Crimewatch. Offences of this type tend to be in the evening and early hours under cover of darkness.

02.45hrs on 16/3/02

Offenders approached aggrieved who was sitting alone smoking a cigarette and questioned him as to what he was doing. Offender then hit the aggrieved in the face and pulled him to the ground demanding he empty his pockets. Offender proceeded to kick aggrieved in the head and body until he complied. Offenders then stole property and left the area.

18.45hrs on 17/2/02

Unknown offender approached aggrieved in poorly lit avenue running to the side of open parkland whilst aggrieved was using his mobile phone to text a friend. Offender snatched the phone from the aggrieved making no threats of violence and made off undetected.

Some of the offences and incidents reported had been of a racial or homophobic nature. Although nothing more than verbal abuse had been used in most cases, the aggrieved are left frightened and upset by their experience.

15.35hrs on 25/4/02

School children have been giving my wife abuse spitting in her face. Wife speaks very little English. Informant states that he has reported this numerous times before.

Other incidents involve the repeated use of motorcycles in the park and the use of air weapons on people, property and wildlife.

22.45hrs on 21/02/02

Offender approached large semi-detached Victorian house situated on edge of large urban park area and fired several pellets from an air rifle at the house cracking upstairs windows and then made good escape.

19.28hrs 5/3/02

Group of lads on 2 motorcycles – three on each bike – riding up and down Moor Park Avenue and the paths towards the swings and Kent Street. Caller concerned they will cause an accident.

The local communities around each of the parks and public open spaces were affected by the constant reports and publicity of crime and nuisance complaints. They stopped using the parks because they were concerned for their safety and they lose confidence in the ability of the police to address the issues.

FEATURES OF OFFENDER/ SOURCE OF PROBLEM

The aggrieved persons described the offenders in most cases as late teens early twenties. The types of offences committed were very opportunist by nature but I was of the opinion that the offenders were in the Moor Park area seeking the opportunity to commit crime. The offenders are probably local and regularly hang around the park. They would have intimate knowledge of the park layout and know the difficulties faced adequately policing such an open area. They would know only too well the ease by which they could commit crime and escape undetected before that crime had even been reported.

Many of the crimes and incidents reported involved gangs of teenagers preying on lone people entering the park especially at night.

RESPONSE

There was a Press Release to publicise Operation Park Keeper

Throughout June, July and August 2002 the Air Support Unit used high visibility patrolling of all the parks in the Preston area in order to deter those intent on crime or anti-social behaviour. There were no cost implications as the patrols were included in return transits from other operational deployments.

In conjunction with the Lancashire Evening Post and other media agencies publicity was given to Operation Park Keeper to heighten awareness of the initiative, to not only deter offenders, but also to reassure the public. The reporter at the LEP instrumental in the 'Make Our Parks Safe' campaign visited the Air Support Unit to gain first hand experience of flying over the parks. This created more publicity for the operation and the capabilities of police aircraft in combating the problems.

SUMMARY

Operation Park Keeper was an initiative aimed at tackling volume crime in an area difficult to police by conventional means.

The Air Support Unit is recognised as the most highly visible police resource available with a unique ability to deter crime over a very wide area. The helicopter targeted the parks on return transits from other operational work therefore there was no additional cost implications to the Unit.

The Lancashire Evening Post were very supportive of Operation Park Keeper by providing plenty of publicity. This focused public awareness on crime prevention and safety measures in the targeted areas.

Links between the Police and Preston City Council are created to tackle a problem common to both agencies.

The Air Support Unit was seen to be intelligence led and contributing to Force and Divisional crime reduction strategies.

A Police resource often seen as very specialist in its role was seen to be pro-actively involved in addressing local policing problems.

ASSESSMENT

Operation Park Keeper resulted in the parks of Preston, in particular Moor Park, being the focus of targeted patrolling by the Lancashire Constabulary helicopter on 47 occasions between 1/6/02 & 31/8/02. This amounted to 5.40hrs flying time in total.

Crime figures for 2002 indicate that on Moor Park there has been a **42% reduction** compared to the same period in 2001.

Even though Operation Park Keeper is not formally running at the moment the parks are still subject to regular checks by the helicopter crews. The presence of the aircraft in the Preston area, on other operational tasks, has continued the sustainability of the initiative due to the secondary disruption and deterrent effect. After all, the criminal has no idea if it's them we are looking at!



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