

'Probing the Problem'

Taking the Scanning Process of the Problem Solving Model into a
Victim Led Intelligence Enhancing Process

Northumbria Police
Gateshead East Area Command

Contact Person: Insp. Kevin Rigg

Insp. Kevin Rigg

Gateshead East Area Command

Northumbria Police

High Street West

Gateshead

Tyne and Wear

NE6 1BN

Tel 0191 4547555 extn. 64131

Kevin.rigg.7644@northumbria.pnn.police.uk

'Probing the Problem'

Taking the Scanning Process of the Problem Solving Model into a Victim Led Intelligence Enhancing Process

Summary

The Problem

Whilst police command and control systems provide information in relation to the times and types of incidents being created and finalised they do not provide direct intelligence. The final codes can often be wrongly allocated and the police are mindful that many crimes and incidents go unreported for a variety of reasons. When addressing the scanning process of the SARA model Gateshead East CBMs and PCSOs have taken this anomaly into account.

The Initiative

Officers identified the potential 'hot spot' of anti social behaviour by using the current intelligence and command and control systems. They then engaged the residents and community within the 'hot spot' area by the use of interview questionnaires. These were completed in a door to door survey by uniformed officers. The results were then analysed to obtain far more comprehensive information and intelligence that was used to assist in addressing the problems and issues raised. Four examples are provided within the text of the main paper.

The Local Authority was involved in the design of the questionnaires and also utilised the information obtained. The costs associated with this tool were absorbed into normal policing operations and did not necessitate any incur of overtime. Whilst some skill is required in the design and type of questions asked, experienced officers and those with an investigative background are able to design and implement the use of this tool. The analysis was prepared and presented by the PCSOs involved and also presented to Problem Solving Forums with a partnership approach. The supervision of such an exercise allows for Sergeants and beat managers to probe and ask relevant questions associated with the identified problems.

Intervention Principles

The process allows for full consultation with victims and allows for their ideas and opinions to be sought. This in turn allows for a victim led approach, targeting the correct issues, and assisting the police and neighbourhood wardens in addressing the issues.

Outcomes

The tool allowed for a more accurate collation of intelligence and information surrounding the problems. The high visibility provided in carrying out the surveys are reassuring to the public and allowed officers to build bridges into the community and gain information from sources not previously tapped. In all of the problems where the tool has been used there has been a significant reduction in disorder incidents and the ability to focus on issues not previously identified. The surveys can be labour intensive with a minimum time scale of 10 minutes to each household; however, the benefits are seen as extremely valuable. It is recommended that this tool be used in appropriate selected operations to obtain the best results.

'Probing the Problem'

Introduction

In addressing the concerns experienced by victims of anti social behaviour the police and their partners can experience problems in determining not only what the actual problem is but also how best to tackle it! On occasions problems emerge as a result of complaints by individual members of the public who may or may not represent the views of their neighbours. Indeed repeated calls to the police from an individual may cause a 'Hot Spot' to be created when the majority of residents and the wider community would not accept that there is in fact a problem at all.

Further, when having identified a problem the application of solutions can very often be applied by agencies without a consultation process having been performed. Whilst members of the public are, on many occasions, best placed to recommend potential solutions and can be informative about the problem.

Gateshead East Area Command is a Police Command Unit situated within the conurbated area of Tyne and Wear. It scores highly in the Vitality Index of the most deprived areas of the UK and this is reflected in the levels of unemployment, as well as crime rates. The population contains a high proportion of persons aged below 24 years and a similar proportion of persons of pensionable age. There is not always an easy mixture when young persons live in close proximity to that of citizens of more mature years.

The area suffers from the traditional problems associated with inner city urbanisation with graffiti, youth disorder and a drugs culture presenting issues of challenge to the police and partnership agencies, as well as creating topics of real concern for the victims of such anti social issues.

The local police act in harmony with the local council not only in passing information in relation to these problems but more recently in combining efforts to resolve them. This is best evidenced by the setting up of neighbourhood problem solving teams where the agencies of the local council (housing, community safety, lighting etc.) combine with the police and local neighbourhood wardens in identifying and addressing the problems associated with their geographical area of concern.

In identifying what the problems are there can be several hurdles to cross. These relate primarily to the quality of management information available to the problem solving forum. There can be masses of information available from computer generated command and control systems; however, this data does not provide a comprehensive or in depth level of information. The essential difference between data and information is that data are not interpreted whereas information has a meaning and use to a particular recipient. In order to identify and scan a particular problem it is clearly of value to have had the widest and most accurate information. This can be obtained from several sources such as, housing office complaints, complaints to the police, and the identification of 'hot spots' by the mapping of incident data. It is accepted that crimes and incidents are not always reported to the police by victims and this 'vacuum' of information can skew any findings to be found in management information systems. This may be more evident where tolerance levels towards anti social behaviour has risen and where faith in the criminal justice agencies and their partners has diminished.

However, having identified the 'surface' problem those engaged in the duty of resolution have the need to dig under the surface, to fully understand and address the issues of concern. This paper sets out how the police in Gateshead East have utilised a system to establish a more accurate appraisal of the issues by engaging with the victims and adopting a victim centred approach.

The Problem

The mere selection of a 'hot spot' for a problem solving approach is only the beginning. One must now formulate hypotheses, define the key goals and indeed indicate the most appropriate operational approach.

The method employed by the Community Beat Managers and Police Community Service Officers in Gateshead to achieve this employs a traditional method of identification of problems and the application of investigative skills to assist in this process. The approach taken was to design a questionnaire and interview those citizens who live in an apparent 'Hot Spot' area, to analyse the results of the responses and to adapt the police and partnership approach to either learn more about the actual problem or to address operational approaches taken to address the issues.

This meant that several issues had to be taken into account prior to selecting where and when to apply a 'door to door' interview process. These revolved primarily around the following:

- Questionnaire design
- Logistics
- Analysis
- Costs

These issues had to be taken into consideration against the background of how labour intensive such an operation can be as well as the methodology used to obtain the information from the public.

Question: Why not utilise a postal survey?

Answer: In engaging uniformed officers in a geographic area with the purpose of interviewing citizens in relation to perceived problems several benefits will be gained.

These include:

- A reassuring presence
- A higher return rate
- The opportunity for residents to pass on soft intelligence and information
- Officers gain first hand knowledge of the area and its problems
- The opportunity for officers to establish networks

Question: What problems can be found in such an approach?

Answer:

- It can be an expensive utilisation of resources to engage in such an exercise.
- If the police do not respond to the concerns raised by the public there is the real risk that public faith in the police will be eroded not enhanced.
- Analysis of questionnaires requires a basic understanding of questionnaire design and approach

Question: In light of these difficulties when should such an approach be adopted and what are the benefits in terms of the information received and indeed the positive actions that can be taken?

Answer: This may be more easily displayed when a selection of the operations where this enquiring approach has been deployed is examined!

Application of Interviews and Results

In July 2003 an historic long term 'hot spot' for disorder calls was identified by the use of police command and control systems to an area on a modern private housing estate. This area known as **Glanton Close** is in close proximity to a disused railway line and also abuts an open field.

In order to gain a greater understanding of what the issues were in Glanton Close and to enable the most productive use of police resources a door to door survey was carried out in August of 2003. The findings of the questionnaire provided some very useful information and in particular the following issues emerged:

- Soft drugs were being hidden in shrubbery surrounding the field
- Apart from litter (including public urination) there were reported incidents of sexual activity in public
- The groups of youths who congregated in the area were thought to be travelling into the area and bringing alcohol with them
- The greatest time for problems were between 8 - 9 on Saturdays contrary to the command and control system which identified mid week as the prime time
- Of the 42 houses visited some 12 felt that there was no youth disorder problem in the area (this however revealed that 76% did feel that there was a significant problem).

As a result of this survey (which tended to confirm the overall picture obtained from the command and control system) police were able to put in place the following.

1. Closer networking with the neighbourhood wardens to monitor the situation thus being able to put in place an early warning system as to when problems were escalating.
2. Intelligence from the survey intimated that a school some miles from the location was the catalyst for organised events being managed by students via the use of mobile phones to congregate in the Glanton Close area.
3. A local store suspected of selling alcohol to youngsters was able to be eliminated as being the principle supplier of alcohol.
4. Between 80 - 100 youths were congregating at one time however due to the information received the deployment of two officers and some PCSOs on a few occasions was sufficient to prevent any large gathering of youths

The application of the door to door surveys on this initial occasion was seen as valuable in allowing a wider understanding of the problems being experienced in Glanton Close and indeed in allowing preventative measures to be put in place. It was therefore evident that such an approach when further refined would be of value in addressing the concerns of residents at Bensham Court in Gateshead.

Bensham Court is a tower block of well serviced flats situated in an area of Gateshead known for having problems associated with drug abuse, high crime rates and social deprivation. As many as 20 calls per month were being recorded on the police command and control system in relation to Bensham Court which houses many elderly residents. The Court has its own small community centre and has a resident caretaker and is also serviced by neighbourhood wardens. The issues at this location culminated in a letter of complaint to the police as well as a petition to the Police Authority and the Chief Constable.

An initial analysis from the police command and control system indicated a high level of calls to the Bensham Court area from a small number of people. The final results of these incidents suggested that on the majority of occasions when police officers attended there was no evident incident that required police action.

Following the concerns raised by the residents suggesting that there was a serious drug and disorder problem in the area, the Court and surrounding streets were subjected to a survey. These were carried out on the 18th and 23rd of September 2003 and a total of 78 interviews were carried out by 8 uniformed police officers.

Analysis of the surveys provided some startling results:

- Only 12 out of the 78 persons interviewed felt that there was a serious disorder issue
- Of those 12 the main concerns were that of children playing in the area and garbage being allowed to gather
- Other issues were criminal damage reports over two years old
- Some residents felt that there was drug dealing taking place in the area

The results indicated that there was not a serious drugs or disorder problem in the area. Police officers photographed Bensham Court and there was no evidence of serious graffiti or criminal damage.

To establish if there was a drug problem in the area observations were kept by the police which suggested that there was no such activity.

It was clear that the perception of those persons who felt that there was a particular problem in the area differed from those of the agencies involved. A CBM was appointed to liaise with the caretaker and residents on a frequent basis, a number of meetings were held between the residents, the police and the housing office. A crime prevention survey was carried out. Some architectural work carried out (anti climb paint applied to some garages). A nearby electricity substation was identified as posing an opportunity for children to climb on and this was brought to the attention of the Electricity Board to rectify.

Since this course of action was taken there have been no calls from the residents of Bensham Court in relation to disorder. The residents have forwarded a letter of thanks to the police.

The benefit of the door to door survey was seen as:

- Police taking positive action
- High visible patrol
- Drugs fears investigated
- Communication with the community enhanced
- A longer term network between the residents, the Housing Office and the Police was established

Whilst much activity was being expended by police officers in the past this has now been considerably reduced to more meaningful contact with the caretaker and neighbourhood wardens on an ad - hoc basis.

The introduction of the Police Community Support Officers occurred in the Gateshead East Area Command in October 2003. These officers were deployed to deal with anti social behaviour in an area of the command unit that would be subject to longer term evaluation by staff from the University of Northumbria at Newcastle. The PCSOs work a permanent 1600 - 0000 shift which covers the seven day period. The geographical area that they cover has an eclectic mix of social and economic factors. The area has high quality affluent neighbourhoods as well as some that score very highly on the vitality index for crime, unemployment, education and housing. The area presents various challenges in that some communities live in late Victorian private terraced and detached dwellings whilst others live in council housing estates built in the 1960s and 1970s.

Two areas covered by the PCSOs were identified by command and control analysis as being long term historic locations for calls of youth disorder and were created as 'hot spots' for PCSO patrol.

The use of the door to door survey was discussed at the multi agency problem solving forum for the area and as a result the Neighbourhood Manager for the Local Authority requested that a series of questions be added to the questionnaire in relation to what agencies could do to reduce problems and to discover how much use was being made of local facilities.

The two areas selected were Jessel Street and Harlow Green / Allerdene.

Jessel Street is situated in a private residential area which consists of late Victorian private terraced housing, some detached housing and a small private park for use by the residents. As with Bensham Court the area was photographed to establish the level of graffiti in the area and to provide the outside observer (i.e. managers and others who do not attend the area on a regular basis) with a graphical image to relate to.

The PCSOs were given ownership of the door to door survey as well as the analysis of the

findings.

Between 29th of November 2003 and 9th December 2003 120 households were visited and residents interviewed in the Jessel Street area.

The main findings of the survey were:

- Residents identified the nature of disorder and when it was occurring
- Residents felt that a significant proportion of youths came from outside of their area
- Alcohol was a feature and it was felt that a local shop was selling liquor to the youths
- Street lighting was considered to be too dark

These issues have been acted upon and when measuring the amount of incidents reported to the police in the period Sept to January 2002 -2003 and the same period for the current year (2003 – 2004) there has been a 26% decrease.

The period measured is an effective period associated with the introduction of PCSO patrols.

Allerdene and Harlow Green represent a contrasting area to that of Jessel Street and its lower middle class environment. Allerdene and Harlow Green are areas where the vitality index would indicate a need for development. There has been reluctance for the public to come forward to the police and there is an apparent lack of opportunity particularly for young persons. There is a small community centre based in Harlow Green which is underused and also subject to congregating youths causing damage. Youth intimidation is a major factor and the area has been devoid of any permanent uniform presence for many years. It was into this environment that PCSOs began their patrols and following an assessment of police command and control systems a door to door survey was carried out. This was carried out in early December 2003 and 70 households were visited. The response from the public was varied; some were reluctant to speak to police in case of reprisals however a good deal of valuable information was gained. This included:

- Where and when anti social behaviour takes place
- What is the nature of the disorder
- Who commits the disorder
- Suggestions from the community as to how to address issues

It was interesting to note that some households gave information as to who they felt were the 'problem families' on their estate.

Again the findings of the surveys are acted upon and discussed with partners at the Problem Solving Forums.

When assessing the level of disorder in the area of Allerdene and Harlow Green there has been a 50% reduction in calls in the period September to January 2002 - 03 as compared to the period 2003 - 04.

It is interesting to note that the amount of calls in relation to disorder and information flow from the residents in this area is increasing. Whilst this is a welcome trend it is more likely to do with the establishment of regular uniform patrol in the area rather than the introduction of the door to door survey. That said it is likely that the door to door exercise will have helped to brake down barriers and establish some communication links. This geographical area is one in which it would be desirable to have the community report more issues to the police so that more positive action can be taken.

The Challenges to be Found in the Application

Having described some of the occasions where the door to survey approach has been used it is worthy to note some of the challenges that need to be addressed in order to gain the best benefit from the tool.

The main difficulties are:

- The surveys do take time to complete (allow 10 minutes for each household as a minimum)
- They can be labour intensive
- The questions asked need to be given careful consideration
- The analysis needs to be carefully commented upon
- The public, having been consulted, need to be able to see the effects of this consultation.

Therefore it may not be pertinent to always utilise a door to door survey on every occasion to identify 'Hot Spot' activity and this method should in fact be used sparingly and when there is a specific need to complement other data collection processes.

None the less in addressing some areas of concern this method has proven to have very good value as a scanning tool.

At Glanton Close the problem was scanned leading to the build up of an intelligence network which in turn will assist operational planning.

The survey at Bensham Court allowed agencies to identify specific issues that were then used to reassure the complainants.

Jessel Street residents were made aware of police activities in the area and their particular concerns were noted and addressed.

A communication network was established in Allerdene and Harlow Green between the PCSOs and the residents. Reassurance levels appear to be increasing (This will be assessed further by the University of Northumbria at Newcastle in July 2004 as part of the assessment of PCSO usage).

In all instances the police and partners have gained:

- More information from the public
- An assessment from the public as to what their fears and needs are
- Little in the way of overtime has been spent (20 hours of observations at Bensham Court at a cost of £700 from the CBM budget)
- All survey work was managed within the remit of either CBM duty or PCSO duty
- Analysis was completed to a meaningful standard and whilst some time was needed to complete this it did remove much of the guess work out of the scanning process
- Specific intelligence in relation to times dates places and the nature of anti social behaviour was obtained
- This has allowed the police and their partners to be able to specifically action the problems in that particular area.

Having consulted with the public it is important that the links established are further utilised to ensure that the community are kept informed of actions taken. This can be done in a number of ways. In Glanton Close the use of intelligence from Neighbourhood Wardens and the local school together with links into the complainants has led to a greater flow of information.

In Bensham Court the establishment of meetings with the residence as well as appointing a liaison CBM has increased everyone's awareness of what is being done in the area.

At Jessel Street and Harlow Green / Allerdene the community links have been established with the use of PCSOs. The local council has been influential in the application of the surveys as well as the use of the findings.

When can the system be utilised?

This system of scanning is not new to the police. Door to door enquiries have been utilised in many major incidents and indeed in traditional crime enquiries. What is unique for the police in Gateshead is the application of the door to door system in given areas to scan issues

around problem solving. Further, the involvement of the partnership agencies in determining the enquiry and acting upon the results allows for quality decisions to be made. Whilst we accept that we need to police with the consent of the public this approach allows for policing *with consultation*.

This system enhances information as well as intelligence as a result of which actions become intelligence led and indeed victim led. The public are given an opportunity to inform as well as advise. It is important to note that those who live with the problem quite often hold the answer to the problems resolution.

This method of scanning has a wide range of use and has and can be deployed for issues such as:

- Street Prostitution
- Off road motorcycling
- Hot Spot evaluation
- Assessing the results of Operations
- Town Centre commercial issues (levels of street crime, begging, touting etc.)

The method will prove of use in any situation where the usual method of utilising management information is flawed (e.g. when the community does not inform the police, or coding systems in police command and control systems are flawed) and where the police wish to thoroughly scan an issue prior to assessing the best way in which to deal with the issue.

Conclusion

This paper has set out to display how, by the deployment of an interview questionnaire designed with purpose, the police and their partners will enhance not only the level of information surrounding a perceived problem but will in fact improve the intelligence.

The use of this method will provide a visible police presence in the area subjected to survey and with good communication skills and targeted action will also enhance reassurance factors. This is in many ways a tried and tested method of obtaining information that has been used over the years by the police. This approach harnesses the application into the Scanning process of the SARA model within the problem solving arena.

No great specialist skills are needed to deploy the system and it is relatively easy to assess. The benefits outweigh the labour costs required to carry out the surveys.

This tool is a simple but effective means by which information and intelligence can be gathered which will enhance information obtained from the usual command and control computer systems or management information systems.

Appendix

- 1 Copy of Questionnaire

GATESHEAD RESIDENTS SURVEY

Officer completing _____ Date _____

Name _____ House No & Postcode _____ Tel No _____

The above information is NOT compulsory

_____ and its surrounding area has been identified as a youth disorder "Hot Spot". The information gathered within this survey might be beneficial in identifying potential solutions to the problem.

Please complete the survey when interviewing residents and retain for analysis.

1. WHAT IS YOUR EXPERIENCE WITH YOUTH DISORDER IN THIS AREA?

2. WHAT IS THE NATURE OF THIS DISORDER?

3. WHO COMMITS THIS DISORDER? DO YOU KNOW WHERE THEY ARE FROM?

4. IF THE DISORDER IS ALCOHOL RELATED, WHERE DO YOU THINK THEY GET THE ALCOHOL FROM?

5. DOES THIS DISORDER HAPPEN ON SPECIFIC DAYS OR AT SPECIFIC TIMES?

6. HOW DO YOU THINK THIS DISORDER COULD BE REDUCED?

7. WHAT DO YOU THINK THAT POLICE, POLICE COMMUNITY SUPPORT OFFICERS OR OTHER AGENCIES COULD DO TO REDUCE THE PROBLEM?

8. DO YOU OR ANY MEMBER OF YOUR FAMILY USE ANY LOCAL COMMUNITY FACILITY? IF SO WHERE?

9. WOULD YOU CONSIDER USING YOUR LOCAL COMMUNITY FACILITY? IF YES WHAT FOR?

10. FURTHER INFORMATION? Use rear of sheet if necessary