

“ROMILLY PARK PROJECT”
VALE OF GLAMORGAN BASIC COMMAND UNIT
SOUTH WALES POLICE

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SUMMARY

ROMILLY PARK PROJECT

Romilly Park is a large Victorian park in the seaside town of Barry in the Vale of Glamorgan. The 'Romilly park project' was initiated as a result of a youth annoyance problem inside the park and in the surrounding area. The problem had escalated to a point where the police were unable to deal with it effectively by using traditional methods alone.

Unlike other youth annoyance problems, which tend to be on a small scale and restricted to small parks or public areas, the problems at the park had grown out of all proportion to anything experienced locally in the past. On Friday and Saturday nights it was not unusual to find in excess of 150 young people inside the park, ranging from 13 to 19 years of age. These young people were not all local to the area, and were travelling to the park from all areas of the town, some even travelling from areas outside the town.

A partnership approach to the problem was developed by forming a small but effective team consisting of police, key local authority managers (from the parks department and visible services), youth workers and members of the youth offending team.

Analysis of the problem was carried out including crime pattern and incident analysis, supported by a detailed and comprehensive survey of the young people using the park, which was conducted by members of youth services.

These results enabled the team to establish exactly what was happening both inside the park and in the immediate surrounding area. It provided them with the information they would need to draw up an effective strategic plan to tackle the issues. In the short term structural changes were made to the park and a highly visible police operation took place. This was supported by public meetings and a press campaign, as well as the provision of alternative activities provided by youth services.

Analysis of reported crimes and incidents in the area, covering a twelve-month period after the commencement of the project, has revealed the following significant reductions in all offences and incidents.

- Autocrime – 91%
- Drunkenness – 74%
- Youth annoyance – 72%
- Damage - 68%
- Vehicle annoyance – 52%

As well as this, a resident's group has formed and the local authorities plan to work closely with them to improve the facilities within the park to the coveted 'Green Flag' standard.

ROMILLY PARK PROJECT

PROJECT DESCRIPTION

Purpose of report

This report will detail a problem solving approach adopted by the Vale of Glamorgan Division to a large-scale youth annoyance problem in a local public area. It will describe the background of the problem, the development of a multi agency team to tackle the problem, the response to the problem, an evaluation of the response and a conclusion of how the project benefits the division in its approach to problem solving, and partnership working.

Background to the problem

The Vale of Glamorgan Division has a large number of open play areas and parks. Historically these parks have suffered from youth annoyance issues and minor public order and damage incidents on a periodic basis. This phenomenon is not uncommon and most areas throughout the country suffer from similar problems in public areas. In the past these problems have been relatively easy to solve police response has been minimal and most issues are quickly resolved.

Romilly Park, however, is a unique park in terms of both its size and make-up and in terms of its location. It consists of an extremely large park surrounded by wrought iron railings. The perimeter of the park is so large that there are six access gates set in the fence around it. Inside the park is a huge grassed area, a large wooded area, a bowling green, several tennis courts, a children's nursery, public toilets and a number of shelters. The park itself is located in the middle of a housing area locally known as the Garden Suburbs. This consists of a number of large detached and semi detached properties and is probably the most exclusive area in the town of Barry. In addition to this the housing area is itself adjacent to both a thriving shopping area which includes shops, public houses and a busy off licence, and a coastal attraction consisting of a popular beach a large car park, shops and again an exclusive residential area.

Up until recent times all of the parks in the Vale of Glamorgan were locked at night and the bigger parks were patrolled and maintained by park wardens. A decision was made some years ago by the local authority to cut costs in this area and to stop locking the gates and remove the wardens.

Since the decision was made to stop locking the gates the problems gradually escalated in the park and efforts to tackle them by traditional policing methods had become virtually impossible. The park began to attract more and more youngsters from all areas of the Vale and escalated to a point where it was not unusual to find 150 to 200 young people ranging in age from early to late teens. The behaviour of these youngsters has deteriorated to a point where on weekends the local police were inundated with calls from local residents. Crime rates were rising particularly in relation to offences of criminal damage, auto crime and drunkenness.

The police, tried a number of different approaches to deal with these youngsters but due to the size and make up of the park, their efforts to tackle the main offenders on the whole proved fruitless. They would merely run off into the park on seeing the police and officers found it impossible to apprehend the offenders. Efforts were even made to utilise PSU (Police Support unit) officers to tackle the problem. An example of this was on the approach to Halloween and Bonfire Night 2002, a period when the problems were at their peak. Even with this number of resources it was impossible to deal effectively with the offenders as there were too many exit gates and too large an area to cover.

Officers were finding increasing evidence of both drug and alcohol abuse within the park and there was also evidence to suggest that sexual activities were taking place amongst the young people.

Understandably the residents had become more and more frustrated and had been expressing their concerns with letters of complaint and public meetings. The residents have become fearful to tackle the youths who roam the park and surrounding areas in large groups as they have been subject to verbal and physical retaliation and have subsequently suffered damage to their property. The fear of crime and disorder was high amongst the occupants of the surrounding houses.

Objectives of the project

- To form an effective working group to tackle the problem.
- To include include as all relevant agencies in order to bring as many resources as possible to the team.
- To tackle the problem from as many different angles as possible.
- To reduce the number of incidents of youth annoyance in the area
- To reduce crime and fear of crime in the area.
- To provide long a term solution to the problem.
- To formulate an effective 'template' for dealing with such problems which could be easily transferred to other areas with similar issues.

Development of partnership

Following the events on the lead up to Halloween and bonfire night 2002, where even such a large contingent of police officers were unable to deal with the behaviour of the youths in the park, a decision was made by the local Sector Inspector to make the park a sector priority. It was obvious that the methods adopted so far to deal with the problem had been ineffective, and that a more co-ordinated approach was needed. It was decided that the best approach would be to formulate a group whose only purpose would be to tackle the issues at the park, remaining focused on the problem until it was eventually resolved.

In November 2002, a police driven initiative commenced and a number of other agencies were invited to take part. A group was formed which included police, in the form of the Sector Inspector, Community Sergeant, the local Community Officer as well as a Youth Liaison Officer, and Vale of Glamorgan Local Authority representatives in the form of Youth Offending Team, Youth Services (including 2 youth workers) the Head of Visible Services and the Head of the Parks Department.

Efforts in the past to persuade the local authority to take measures in the park to reduce the problem had fallen on stony ground. The answer to all our requests had always been 'no' and invariably this was based on the lack of finances or resources. To increase the chances of success for the group it was therefore vitally important to ensure that the representatives from the other agencies were in a position to make crucial decisions on these issues without having to refer back to higher management. This was given careful consideration when deciding whom we should invite to join us. As well as this, from experiences with other multi-agency groups it was felt that careful consideration should be given to the make up of the rest of the group. Whilst trying to involve as many people as possible it was also important to keep the group focussed and to make sure that all of the members could contribute positively to achieving our aims and objectives. It was therefore agreed that in the early stages we should not invite members of the community or young people to join us and that we would reconsider this as the project developed.

We agreed to name our group 'Romilly Park Youth Annoyance Task Group'. All of those now involved were keen to make the initiative a success.

Partnership response to the problem

At the start of the project it was agreed that we would have to remain focussed. Romilly Park contained every aspect imaginable of youth annoyance issues and it would be important in the coming months not to allow ourselves to be distracted by any new problems in the division thereby losing the momentum in the park. The project would also present us with a huge challenge, which we all felt would require a great deal of resilience and initiative to resolve. Our ultimate goal was not only to resolve the issues at Romilly Park but also to develop a form of template, which could be transferred to other similar situations throughout the division.

Initially the local authorities put forward a proposal to secure the perimeter fence and lock all of the entry gates after 5:00 P.M. each night. This was as a result of the requests by the police in the early stages of the problem developing, when we asked for this to be done to restrict entry to the youths who were starting to gather there. Initially this request had been turned down by the authority due to lack of finances but was now being proposed as an easy quick fix to the problems. This proposal was rejected by the police as it was felt that the problems, and indeed the numbers of youths attending at the park had escalated to such a degree that to merely exclude these youths from the park at this late stage would only serve to displace the problem to another area. The youths turning up to find the gates locked would simply move to adjoining areas which would lend themselves to this displacement and would present us with an even more difficult problem to resolve. Eventually everyone agreed that the problem was now so large that the only way to tackle it and to obtain a long-term solution would be to deal with it effectively within the park.

Crime pattern and incident analysis was carried out by the police and identified that the problems seemed to slowly escalate in the park throughout the year starting with a relatively small number of incidents in January and February and climbing as the weather improved. The largest rise occurred as the autumn approached increasing sharply in October and November due to the approach of Halloween and Bonfire night. The analysis also showed that the problem was worst on a Friday and Saturday night.

The first task we undertook as a team was to deploy Youth workers inside the park on a Friday and Saturday night for a period of six weeks to observe the behaviour of the youths and to complete a questionnaire which had been formulated by the team. We believed it was necessary to establish exactly what was occurring within the park and the reason for the problem escalating to this point before we could deal with it effectively. Too often organisations try to resolve issues with the best of intentions but do so without first establishing the whole picture. The youth workers persuaded 120 of the young people present to take part in the survey.

The results of this project were startling and a copy of their findings is attached. It established the following points for us to consider when tackling the problem.

- The young people using the park range from 13 to 19 in age
- They were travelling from as far away as Rhoose (a town situated in the rural vale area and some 7 miles by road from the park). This was highly unusual as in our previous experience problems of this nature particularly in parks tended to involve young people from the immediate area and previously they had tended to be very territorial.
- The makeup of the group was 55% male 45% female (a much higher percentage of females than previously experienced in similar problem areas)
- They travelled to the park by train, on foot, by taxi and some were dropped there by their parents
- They stated that they attended the park in the main in order to meet friends. This was a revelation in itself as previously the answer given by most youngsters was that there was nothing else to do.
- A number of the youths admitted that there was large-scale alcohol usage, drugs including class A, vandalism violence and sexual activity.
- They explained how they felt when the police arrived and how they reacted to that presence
- They stated they were aware of the effect of their presence on the local residents and a large percentage admitted to using abusive language both to their peers and to adults in the area.

Armed with the results of the survey and the police statistics a number of suggestions were tabled in relation to how to approach the issues at the park. Agreement was eventually reached on both short term and long term objectives for the park based around police objectives, local authority objectives and findings of the survey. Short term measures which were agreed included:-

1. The Council agreed to invest a substantial amount of money in repairing holes in the perimeter fence.
2. The Council agreed to lock all gates bar one on a Friday and Saturday evening, thereby restricting access to one gate which could be easily policed and controlled.
3. The Council agreed to close the tennis court area which is adjacent to houses to discourage youth activity in this area.
4. The Council agreed to adjust lighting in the park to just one shelter which is situated in a central location in order to make this area more attractive to the youths, thereby keeping them as far away from residential properties as possible.
5. Youth workers secured funding to place members of their team in the park for a 12 month period to supervise and monitor the behaviour of the youths.

6. Police agreed to supply sufficient resources to assist with controlling the access point into the park with a view to preventing drug and alcohol offences.
7. All parties agreed to approach both the youths and their parents who, very often, would drop them at the front gate with drug prevention and health related advice in order to raise their awareness in relation to these issues.
8. It was agreed to engage the local community with a view to re-establishing local residents groups and to encourage their involvement in our project and in the future management of the park.

The long-term plans for the park include a drive by the council to improve standards in the park to a level where the prestigious 'Green Flag' status will be awarded to the park. This will eventually involve upgrading of facilities, community involvement, the reintroduction of a park warden and educational facilities. There is a commitment to achieve this standard by 2006.

A public meeting was called and was well attended by the local residents. All interested parties attended this meeting which was chaired by Superintendent Jones the Divisional Commander. Each section of the task group presented their findings and plans to the audience.

Initially the residents were angry and frustrated at their perceived lack of action in the past but as the proposals were unveiled they became more receptive to the proposals and a large number offered to help with the long term management of the park. Interest was also shown in forming a residents group. There was however a general feeling of scepticism amongst the crowd as they justifiably felt that they had been made promises in the past which had never been honoured. At the conclusion the task group members all felt that the residents had left feeling generally up beat about our proposals and we all agreed that we would have to remain focused to deliver what we had promised.

The Operation

It was important for us to emphasise at the start of the operation that we did not intend to stop the young people from using the park completely (as they were perfectly entitled to do so). Our aims had always been to reduce the numbers attending there to a manageable amount. By providing attractions elsewhere and educating those that remained as to the effect of their behaviour we intended, with a view to regulating it and keeping it within acceptable boundaries.

The operation effectively commenced with the introduction of the youth workers into the park. This initiative was supported by the police who maintained a presence out of sight of the park but close enough to provide any support needed. This was to allow the workers to mix with the young people in a more realistic environment without a visible police presence. They could observe the behaviour as it was happening without it being influenced by the police presence. They would also be able to build a better relationship with the young people without being seen as being connected to the police.

On the first weekend the behaviour of the youngsters in the park coupled with the sheer numbers involved caused the youth workers to become so fearful for their safety that they left. They returned the following week to find that their presence was being slowly accepted by the youths, and over the period of the next few months they fully accepted their presence in the park and began to regulate their behaviour.

The local authorities then set about repairing the perimeter fence in preparation to the closing of the gates at the commencement of the police operation. Action was taken to secure the bowling green and the tennis courts and work was carried out to turn of all of the lighting in the park leaving just the shelter in the centre of the park illuminated.

A press release was agreed involving all of the partners explaining what we intended doing. This was publicised on the week leading up to the commencement of the police operation in all of the relevant papers covering the areas which we now knew the young people came from.

On the first Friday in May 2002 five of the six gates were duly locked and a large visible police presence was deployed inside the park and on the only entrance gate. As young people started to arrive they were spoken to by the officers explained to them the purpose of the operation as well as the consequences of any anti social or criminal behaviour both inside the park and in any surrounding areas. Alcohol was confiscated and several persons were searched for drugs. Parents who were dropping their children off at the gate were also spoken to and advised as to the purpose of the operation. On hearing this a large number who were totally unaware of the problems immediately took their children away.

Inside the park youth workers continued to monitor the youngsters but this time with the visible police presence, they were supported by 'Inroad' (a local drugs advisory group) workers who advised the children of the effects of alcohol and drug abuse as well as unprotected and underage sex. The young people were offered alternative activities to the park including invitations to a local youth facility known as Area 41 which is run by the youth services and offers a variety of activities until 10p.m. on a nightly basis. They were also encouraged to attend a monthly dance, which is targeted towards people from 14 to 17 years of age and is known as the 'Vibe Event'.

It was noticeable right from the start that the number of people attending on the first night of the operation were reduced and feedback from those attending was that the advertising campaign had put some people off attending. In addition to this the more troublesome element on seeing the police presence, and realising that they were unable to enter the park without going through the only open gate, chose to loiter in the surrounding streets. These persons were dealt with positively by the police and they soon dispersed.

This approach was maintained every Friday and Saturday night for the proceeding weeks. The group met regularly to discuss progress and to consider whether we needed to amend the approach in any way.

Results

As the weeks passed we noticed a decline in the numbers attending at the park. The attendance at the alternative venues increased and we noted that on the nights when the vibe event was held there were virtually no people in the park. We constantly monitored the surrounding area for signs of displacement and could not find any evidence that this had occurred. The main trouble makers, knowing that they could not enter the park and aware of the level of police activity in the surrounding area, stopped attending all together and the behaviour of the people attending improved dramatically. As the numbers attending the park declined we slowly reduced the level of police officers in the area.

The area continued to be monitored by police patrols in order to react quickly to any resurgence of problems but the park and surrounding areas remained quiet and trouble free. Aware of the problems experienced in the previous years on the approach of Halloween the number of high visibility patrols were increased and the task group organised diversionary activities for the young people. A large youth event was organised for the night of Halloween and was well advertised throughout the local schools and youth centres. Several hundred young people attended the event, which passed without incident. Analysis of the number of calls received by the Vale of Glamorgan Division on what is traditionally the busiest night of the year showed an overall reduction of 30%. In addition to this there were no incidents of youth annoyance or criminal activity recorded in the park or surrounding area. In fact visits to the park by police patrols found them to be completely empty, in stark contrast to the mayhem of previous years, where police were unable to deal with the problems and actually came under attack from youths firing fireworks directly at them.

In January 2004 the incident and crime figures for 2003 were compared with those from 2002 and the following results were noted.

- There was a significant reduction in All incidents reported in the park and surrounding areas.
- Theft from motor vehicles fell by 91%
- Reports of youth annoyance fell by 72%
- Offences of drunkenness fell by 74%
- Offences of criminal damage dropped by 68%
- Reports of incidents of annoyance caused by vehicles fell by 52%
- The total number of incidents including miscellaneous incidents fell by 63%

A further residents meeting was held to discuss the progress and the task group actually received a standing ovation at the end from the same residents who had attended the original meeting displaying such anger and frustration.

Conclusions

The task group has now become a well-organised team. We have developed what we refer to as our 'template' to deal with large-scale youth annoyance issues.

The reduction in crime and incidents in Romilly Park continues to be maintained and this has allowed the group to focus on other areas within the division where similar problems have been experienced. We have invited representatives from other areas to attend our meetings to highlight these problems and as a result we have chosen a new project area to concentrate on in 2004. We have secured funding and resources and the first stage of placing the youth workers into the area to carry out a survey is imminent.

Other divisions throughout South Wales Police are to have heard of our success and details of our project have been forwarded to them for their consideration when tackling such issues.

A residents group has been formed for Romilly Park and they will be working closely with the local authorities and police in the coming years to achieve the 'Green Flag' status for the park.

A recent questionnaire completed by the residents shows that prior to the intervention their quality of life was seriously reduced by the activities in the park. They all stated that since the initiative they have experienced a noticeable improvement in their quality of life and expressed a great deal of satisfaction with the way the issues have been dealt with. It was also obvious from comments, which they had added to the questionnaires, that the overall fear of crime had been hugely reduced and feeling of well being and relief was evident.